Fan identification and the perception of the sponsor-team fit

The case of Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC
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Nima Beik

James Galbraith

Jönköping International Business School
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Authors: Nima Beik
         James Galbraith

Tutor: Adele Berndt

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Abstract

Sponsorship has become an important factor in determining the success and competitiveness of a sports team. While previous sports sponsorship literature has been substantial, the fans and their perceptions of the sponsor(s) has often not been focused upon. A fans’ identification or connection with a sports team can differ amongst fans, as it influences their engagement with the team and their respective sponsor. Previous literature regarding the perceived fit between a team and a sponsor has been limited to the use of hypothetical sponsors. This research therefore focuses on how different levels of fan identification influence their perceptions of the sponsor-team fit, with a specific focus on the sponsor Emirates Airlines and the football team Arsenal FC.

The purpose of this research is to establish an insight into how different levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans perceive the sponsor-team fit with Emirates Airlines. The research questions have been divided into two sub questions; one focusing on high-identified Arsenal FC fans and the other on low-identified Arsenal FC fans. In order to fulfil the purpose of this thesis, existing literature was used to create an identification survey that was completed by over 100 Arsenal FC fans residing in Sweden. The survey identified a number of high-identified and low-identified fans, of which five high-identified and five low-identified fans were chosen to participate in interviews.

The empirical findings reveal that the identification of a sports fan with their sports team does impact their perception of the sponsor-team fit. High-identified fans were more
receptive of the sponsor due to their financial support, contributing to a more successful team. Low-identified fans were more receptive of the sponsor due to the duration of the sponsorship, and described this as the main reason to their positive perception of the sponsor-team fit.
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1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the background and problem discussion, providing a broader view of sports team sponsorship and the fans’ perceptions. In succession, the research purpose and research questions are proposed. And finally, a list of key-terms is provided along with the delimitations and scope of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Globally, sponsorship has endured a steady rate of growth over the past five years. According to IEG (2015), global sponsorship spending in 2015 was forecasted to reach US $57.5 billion, following a 4.1% increase over 2014.

Cornwell (2014) has stated that sponsorship is simply the act of "one entity supporting or accepting responsibility" (p. 15) for another entity. Other marketing literature has defined sponsorship as “an investment, in cash or kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity” (Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36). In terms of sports sponsorship, the most valuable piece of inventory is located on the team's playing shirt, which is known as the shirt sponsor (Jensen, Bowman, Wang & Larson, 2012). The shirt sponsorship is an invaluable source of product placement for the sponsor as it is visible to fans and spectators whenever the team plays. From a club perspective, shirt sponsorship benefits come in form of monetary values, which can be reinvested into the club “to improve team quality and other managerial aspects” (Biscaia et al., 2013, p. 289).

Sponsorship has come to be viewed as a cost-effective strategy towards promotion and overall marketing concerns (Meenaghan, 1998b). There are many different types of sports sponsorship deals. In a UK Sport guide to sponsorship (UK Sport, n.d.), the most common sponsorship agreements in the sports industry are outlined:

• Shirt / Team sponsorship (e.g. Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC)
• Squad sponsorship (e.g. Scandia and the British sailing team (UK Sport, n.d.))
• Athlete sponsorship (e.g. Mesut Ozil and Adidas boots)
• Event sponsorship (e.g. Barclay's Premier League)
• Venue / Stadium sponsorship (e.g. Emirates Stadium)
• Broadcast sponsorship (e.g. Heineken and the UEFA Champions League)
• Small athlete sponsorship deal (e.g. A football player receiving 4 free pairs of football boots a year)

The sporting industry draws a massive audience all around the world and for this reason it is a natural environment for companies to engage in sponsorship. The Barclays Premier League (known as the Premier League) is a professional football league based in England. The Premier League was formed in 1992 and is now the most watched football league in the world with a global television audience of 4.67 billion watching in over 212 territories (The world's most watched league, 2016). In the 2013/14 season, the Premier League boasted the largest revenue of all-European leagues, generating €3.9 billion (Jones, Houlihan & Bull, 2015). In the Premier League, shirt sponsorship is a lucrative business. It is forecasted that in the 2015/16 season, Premier League teams will earn a combined £222.85 million from shirt sponsorships alone (Mackay, 2015).

One of the oldest football clubs in the Premier League is Arsenal FC. Founded in 1886, the club has enjoyed exceptional success on the field, having won over 27 major trophies since entering the top tier of English professional football in 1919 (Smyth, 2012). This on field success has reflected in an even stronger success off the field, including a large following of the fans across the globe with Arsenal FC ranked as the fifth most popular sporting team on social media (Badenhausen, 2015).

In 2004, Arsenal FC signed with Arabic airline, Emirates Airlines. At the time, the deal was the most lucrative sports sponsorship deals in Premier League history. In 2012, a new deal, valued at £150 million, was struck to maintain the partnership until 2019 (Arsenal, 2012). Emirates Airline’s support for Arsenal FC stretches beyond just shirt sponsorship to include the rights of naming the stadium. Until 2028, the home stadium of Arsenal FC, located in London, will be named “Emirates Stadium”. Arsenal FC is expected to receive £30 million over the period making them the third highest paid team behind Manchester United FC (sponsored by Chevrolet) and Chelsea FC (sponsored by Yokohama) (Arsenal, 2012).

Football is a universal sport with a reported 3.5 billion fans (World's Most Popular Sports by Fans, 2016). The thesis focuses on Sweden, which is one of many countries that have embraced the game of football. In a survey conducted by the Fédération
Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), found that 11% of the total Swedish population play football (FIFA, 2007). According to Twitter analytics (Premier League: Where are your club's followers?, 2016), 22.45% of Swedish Premier League fans support Arsenal FC; this is the most popular team amongst Swedish Premier League supporters, and will serve as the team under analysis in this thesis.

1.2 Problem discussion

Sports team sponsorship is more important than ever, for teams and companies alike, with levels of sponsorship investment continuing to grow for every year (IEG, 2015). The success and competitiveness of teams can often be influenced by the support it receives through its sponsorship deals. Sponsorship is an agreement that primarily involves the team and the sponsor, however the fan's perception towards the sponsor is often not focused upon (Bruhn & Holzer, 2015).

Fans play a vital role in the success of professional sports. Without fans, there would be no audience for broadcasting, and therefore little incentive for investors to supply financial support for professional teams (in the form of sponsorship) (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Previous research into the perceived fit between a sponsor and a team has been limited to the use of hypothetical or abstract sponsors rather adopting a practical perspective (Biscaia et al., 2013). A fan's level of identification with a team, or their psychological connection to the sports team (Murell & Dietz, 1992), can differ, impacting their perception of the team and the team’s respective sponsor(s). Thus, the authors have identified the need to further understand how different levels of fan identification with a team impact the fans’ perceptions towards the sponsor-team fit within a real-world context.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to analyse how different levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden, perceive the sponsor-team fit with Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC.
1.3.1 Research question

**RQ:** How do different levels of Arsenal FC fans perceive the sponsor-team fit between Arsenal FC and their main sponsor Emirates Airlines?

**RQa:** How do high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive this sponsor-team fit?

**RQb:** How do low-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive this sponsor-team fit?

1.4 Delimitations

The purpose of this thesis is limited to the fans’ perceptions of sponsorship in terms of sponsor-team fit. Furthermore, it is limited to Swedish fans’ perceptions of only one Premier League team, Arsenal FC, and their main sponsor Emirates Airlines. Arsenal FC is the most popular Premier League team in Sweden (Premier League: Where are your club’s followers?, 2016) and value can be found for sponsors to understand the perceptions that international sports fans have with regards to the fit between the sponsor and a team.

Fans are arguably the most important assets of any sports team; therefore, this thesis will focus on high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans and their perceptions towards the sponsor-team fit. This heterogeneous population purposively excluded moderately-identified fans from the sample, focusing instead on key themes between two contrasting degrees of fan identification.

1.5 Key terms

**Barclays Premier League** – The Barclays Premier League (commonly referred to as the Premier League) is an English professional league for men’s association football clubs, contested by 20 teams, operating on a system of promotion and relegation with the football league (History of the Premier League, 2015).

**Sponsorship** – "An investment, in cash or kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity" (Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36).
**Sponsorship Fit** – "Perceived match of attributes between sponsoring firms and sponsored objects"

**Fan Identification** – Is largely seen as the strength of fans’ psychological connection to their sports team (Murell & Dietz, 1992).
2 Frame of reference

This chapter presents an overview of theories regarding sponsorship, and in particular sports sponsorship, in order to evaluate an understanding of sponsor-team fit.

2.1 Sponsorship in general

Sponsorship hasn’t always been perceived to be an investment. As Meenaghan (1998b) points out, earlier perceptions of sponsorship view sponsorship more as a philanthropic activity that has placed less emphasis on the commercial return of the investment. These perceptions are illustrated well in Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's 1974 definition of sponsorship cited in Meenaghan (1998b, p. 10), "Sponsorship is the donation or loan of resources (people, money, material, etc.) by private individuals or organisations to other individuals or organisations engaged in the provision of those goods and services designed to improve the quality of life".

Now, sponsorship is known to be of vital use in funding different sporting, artistic and social events/activities (Speed & Thompson, 2000). A sponsorship’s ability to achieve marketing goals has led companies of all sizes to invest in many different types of sporting and artistic global events, such as music festivals or the FIFA World Cup (Tripodi, 2001). Masterman (2007) defines sponsorship "as something that is used to achieve business objectives such as increased awareness or sales" (p. 28). In particular, sports sponsorship offers an appealing avenue of sponsorship due to both its capabilities of targeting specific consumers and attracting mass audiences (Dolphin, 2003). The idea that sponsorship is a tool to reach audiences and raise awareness was reinforced by Abratt, Clayton and Pitt (1987), who state that, "anonymous sponsorship, even philanthropic, is rare" (p. 299).

For the purpose of this research, the authors have chosen to use Meenaghan's (1991) definition of sponsorship, which describes sponsorship as an investment that may bring the potential to exploit commercial opportunities. This definition specifies that sponsorship is first and foremost an investment, which carries the possibility to capitalise on commercial opportunities in the future. The authors agreed that this definition reflects the modern day qualities of sponsorship, insinuating its role as a commercial investment rather than a
donation. The definition also alludes to the thought that sponsorship is a partnership rather than just a transaction.

2.2 Benefits of sponsorship

Some of the biggest motivating factors in sponsorship can be seen through the financial gain of the sponsored party and exposure for the sponsor. In return for a financial contribution, a sports organization will let a company use its name in prospective commercial activities. Mitchell (2008) suggests that in the case for companies aiming to sponsor a sports team, factors such as brand awareness, brand image, customer relations, or community relations often play a vital role. However, sports teams or events are often perceived as being associated with gold medals, world records, championships, and global awareness. Therefore, companies tend to strive towards incorporating themselves to such excellence, attempting to associate themselves with success. For example, Coca-Cola sought out the Olympics and FIFA World Cup for its sponsorships.

Jacobs, Jain and Surana (2014) have stated that companies who understand their marketing metrics related to sponsorship stand to increase their returns by as much as 30%. However, research is divided on the reasons behind companies investing large sums of money into properties. Madrigal (2001) argued that sponsors hope that the goodwill consumers' feel towards the event, cause or sporting team will "rub off" on their respective brands. Nicholls, Roslow and Dublish (1999) state that benefits of sponsorship lie in brand recall of consumers when they had already had a preference for that product prior to sponsorship. Overall, sports sponsorship is seen as an important marketing tool for corporate sponsors and remains a valuable income stream for professional sports teams (Bühler, Heffernan, & Hewson, 2007).

2.3 Sponsorship portfolio diversity

The authors have looked at the sponsorship portfolio diversity from the perspective of the company, in this case, Emirates Airlines.
2.3.1 Theoretical components

A sponsorship portfolio has been defined by Chien, Cornwell and Pappu (2011) as a "collection of brand and/or company sponsorships comprising of sequential and/or simultaneous involvement with events, activities and individuals (usually in sport, art and charity) utilized to communicate with various audiences" (p. 142). The sponsor is responsible for the maintenance of the sponsorship portfolio. Bruhn and Holzer (2015) explain that the number of sponsorship engagements within one specific category of the sponsorship is defined as the depth of a sponsorship portfolio (e.g. a company may sponsor different teams within a number of different sports or events). They found that a large perceived sponsorship portfolio size positively affects the attitude of consumers toward the sponsor, however there is no direct correlation to whether or not these attitudes lead to a positive perception of the sponsor's products. Furthermore, companies that try to engage in vast amounts of sponsorship activities, for instance to increase brand awareness, achieve this by diversifying their sponsorship portfolio across different sponsor categories (Bruhn & Holzer, 2015). For example, if Nike were to expand their brand towards a more ecological friendly state of mind, they would need to search for sponsorship within a more sustainable company/brand. This therefore increases their portfolio size and helps create visibility amongst ecological friendly consumers.

In contrast, it is vital for a sponsor and the sponsored team to have a similar fit in order to achieve a successful sponsorship amongst consumers. With consumers contributing to a positive perception towards the sponsor and sponsored team, this can lead to promising benefits for the sponsor and its provided products/services (Bruhn & Holzer, 2015). The duration of the sponsorship deals within the sponsorship portfolio can strengthen the overall perception of the diversity of the sponsorship portfolio.

2.3.2 Emirates Airline’s portfolio diversity

In terms of duration, it can be stated that companies that hold sponsorship over a long period of time can promote the idea of being a stable and successful company. In a press release from Arsenal's Senior Vice-President, he stated:

"Emirates is the perfect partner for Arsenal and we are delighted to have agreed a new partnership. Emirates is a world-class brand and by flying to more than 120 destinations across six continents has a
truly global reach. This reach will play an important role in our own ambitions to further extend the depth of our following around the world. The fact this partnership will continue for many years to come underlines how much both organisations value and benefit from the relationship.” - (Arsenal, 2012)

This statement depicts the concept of a prospering relationship between two brands that operate within very different industries, but still find benefits for each other's future purpose, which is to expand the overall reach of consumers. However, does the sponsor-team fit play an impact on the perceptions of the different levels of identified fans?

The breadth of Emirates Airline’s portfolio of sports sponsorship deals is extensive. The airline sees sponsorship as a key aspect to their marketing strategy as it allows them to associate and relate to their customers; Sponsorships “allows us to share and support their interests and to build a closer relationship with them” (Emirates Sponsorships, 2016). Figure 2 (located on the next page) illustrates just how extensive their sponsorship portfolio is. Emirates Airline's sponsorship portfolio stretches across a large number of different sports and consists of a wide variety of sponsorship deals that include teams, events and stadiums.
Figure 1. Emirates Airline’s sponsorship portfolio (Dumas, 2013)
2.4 Sponsorship fit

2.4.1 Sponsor property

In sponsorship literature, property is usually referred to as a team, event, individual or activity that is accepting sponsorship from another entity (Cornwell, 2014). The term property is a commonly used term in relation to the perceived fit of sponsorships, and is referred to as the sponsor-property fit (Cornwell, 2014). Consumers usually have a more positive image of the sponsor if they believe that the sponsor's image "fits" the sporting team (Becker-Olsen, 2003). Jagre, Watson & Watson (2001) clarify an example by stating that, “sponsorship fit that is expected and consistent would be Adidas sponsoring a sporting event or Montana Wine sponsoring a wine and food festival. An unexpected and inconsistent fit would be the Bank of America sponsoring a sporting event or Nike sponsoring a wine and food festival” (p. 442).

2.4.2 Sponsor-team fit

In order to define fit, it is important to understand that sponsorship literature has interchangeably used a number of terms to describe it, with some of the most commonly used terms being 'congruence', 'similarity', 'fit' or 'relatedness' (Fleck & Quester, 2007). Following on from previous research on sponsorship (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012), researchers have used the terms 'fit' and 'congruence' interchangeably, however the term fit will be used throughout this thesis. Fit, as defined by Speed and Thompson (2000), is "the degree to which the pairing [of an event and sponsor] is perceived as well matched or a good fit, without any restriction on the basis used to establish fit" (p. 230).

The authors have chosen to use Speed and Thompson's (2000) definition of fit for the purpose of this thesis, but they further modify the definition to focus on the property as an organisation (team) rather than an event. The original definition limits itself to only the pairing of a sponsor and an event, however the definition can be expanded to also include individuals or in this case, teams. It highlights that the basis of which fit is assumed or perceived isn’t limited, allowing fit to be based on any understanding. Therefore, the authors will refer to the fit between a sponsor and a team as the sponsor-team fit.
2.4.3 The different streams of sponsorship fit

In a recent study, Bruhn and Holzer (2015) analysed sponsorship literature and divided it into three different reviews. The first review identified that the majority of research has focused on the composition of fit in terms of image or general associations. The second review looked specifically at the sponsors relationship with the object, leading to identifying six streams of fit that have been researched in the past. The third and final review of literature focused on studies that measured the effects of fit, finding that the majority of studies express that fit and sponsorship success is positively affected.

All three reviews are important and relevant to sports sponsorship literature, however the second review is of particular interest to the authors as it focuses predominately on a sponsor's relationship with the object. As the thesis aims to understand the sponsor-team fit and how fans bearing different levels of identification perceive it, the authors felt that it was important to highlight these streams of fit that had been previously researched.

Within the second review, six different streams of fit (that have been previously researched) were revealed. The six streams (listed in table 1) highlight the different objects that have been studied in relation to sponsorship fit. It is important to note that of these six previously researched streams, none include an organisation or team as the principle property in relation to sponsorship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Streams</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Example of stream</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sponsor-event fit</td>
<td>(Johar &amp; Pham, 1999; Speed &amp; Thompson, 2000; Cornwell et al., 2006; Fleck &amp; Quester, 2007; Olson &amp; Thjømøe, 2009; Olson, 2010; Olson &amp; Thjømøe, 2011; Bruhn &amp; Holzer, 2015)</td>
<td>The fit between a sponsor and an event. <em>E.g.</em> <em>The fit between the car company Kia sponsoring the Australian Open Tennis Championships</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Fit between event and sponsor’s product</td>
<td>(McDonald, 1991; Gwinner &amp; Eaton, 1999)</td>
<td>The fit between a sponsor’s product and the event being sponsored. <em>E.g.</em> <em>The fit between the sports-themed beverages Gatorade sponsoring the Ironman Triathlon.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fit between sponsor and the cause or issue being sponsored</td>
<td>(Rodgers, 2003; Simmons &amp; Becker-Olsen, 2006; Fleck &amp; Quester, 2007)</td>
<td>The fit between the sponsor and the sponsored cause, and its perception regardless of communication or marketing efforts. <em>E.g.</em> <em>ALPO (dog food) sponsoring the Humane Society (animal protection organisation).</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Six streams of fit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stream</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fit between co-sponsors</td>
<td>The fit between two or more sponsors simultaneously sponsoring a single sponsorship property. E.g. Coca-Cola, McDonalds &amp; Panasonic sponsoring the 2012 London Olympics all together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Fit between sponsor and audience</td>
<td>The fit between a sponsor and a wider audience - (cause-related marketing). E.g. Starbucks opting to donate a portion of their coffee sales to the 2004 Tsunami Relief Fund.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Fit between different sponsored causes of the same sponsor</td>
<td>The fit between a sponsor and their collection of other sponsorship deals (sponsorship portfolio). E.g. Samsung simultaneously sponsoring the Olympic Games, Crufts (a dog show) and the Paralympics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.4.4 Previous research on sponsorship fit

Past research has mainly focused on the fit in terms of sponsorship and events or people, rather than sponsorship and teams. McDonald (1991) argues that a perceived match between a sponsor and an event influences the consumer’s attitude towards the sponsorship engagement. While a study by Speed & Thompson (2000), found that when the fit between the sponsor and event is consistently present, a stronger response is evoked from the consumer. Other studies have concluded that consumer attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural intentions are influenced by the level of perceived fit between the event and the sponsor (Becker-Olsen, 2003; Koo, Quarterman & Flynn, 2006). Some studies (Madrigal, 2000; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010) look at the relationship between fans and sponsorship, when fans are in attendance at a particular sporting event. In relation to the research question at hand, the authors identified a number of important components that may be important when determining a fan's perception of the sponsor-team fit.

2.4.4.1 Congruence

The fit between a sponsoring company's brand, product or service, and its relation with the event, based on consumers' perceptions, has been identified through the congruity theory. Jagre et al. (2001), define the congruity theory as the process towards identifying the attitude change when a source (sponsor) is connected to a particular attitude object (brand).
The congruity theory further suggests that the storage in memory and retrieval of information is usually influenced by past experiences.

Research suggests that congruence is vital for a consumer's cognitive and affective perceptions towards a specific sponsorship (Cornwell et al., 2006). Congruent sponsorships formulate consumer perceptions of consistency by meeting cognitive expectations (D'Astous & Bitz, 1995). This statement demonstrates why consumers will respond negatively towards incongruent sponsorships (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), incongruent meaning a low level of fit between two constructs. Furthermore, research has also shown that highly incongruent sponsorships express less favourable perceptions towards the sponsor and the sponsored object (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). According to the congruity theory, incongruity is difficult to stimulate cognitive feelings, which ultimately leads to negative feelings and attitudes that are put into evaluation (Mandler, 1982).

2.4.4.2 Duration

Although there hasn't been a sufficient amount of evidence proving that the sponsorship duration plays an important role between a company and the team, Cornwell, Roy and Steinard (2001) conclude that sponsorship duration is vital towards linking the consumer with the advertisement from the sponsor. These linkages thus activate the awareness of the consumer more towards brand recall. It is further mentioned that because sports sponsorship is event based and requires more interpretation than traditional media communication methods, it shows that there is room for studies to help justify the benefits of sponsorship duration in a sports team context (Cornwell et al., 2001).

Fleck and Quester (2007) speculated that a long duration of the sponsor's association with an object could be an expected facet of fit. However, Olson and Thjomøe (2011) noting the little research conducted on fit perceptions found that the duration of the sponsorship could greatly predict fit overall. In particular, they found that relationships that were long-term and continuing, contributed to articulating the overall fit.

2.4.4.3 Sponsor sincerity & attitude

Olson (2010) found that sponsor sincerity and sponsor attitude was a result of the consumer's perceived fit. This statement agrees with an earlier study conducted by Olson and Thjomøe (2009), who also found that fit had a positive relationship with consumers'
attitudes of the sponsor. Finally, Madrigal (2001) also alluded to the idea that fans are more inclined to have a favourable attitude towards a sponsor when sponsorship is reducing their team's expenses. Interestingly enough, the same study by Olson and Thjømøe (2009) found that fit had a minimal connection with sponsorship recognition, which points to incongruence. Cornwell (2014) describes incongruence as the action of “thinking twice”, which may result in memorising the sponsor at a later point.

In terms of research into the fit between a sponsor and a team, previous studies (Parker & Fink, 2010; Hong, 2011) have determined a link between being a fan of a team and a positive attitude in relation to the sponsors. Madrigal (2001) demonstrates that goodwill can be transferred from the fans to the sponsor through “team-sponsor association”. However, the majority of research has been conducted on abstract or hypothetical sponsors (Biscaia et al., 2013), while little research has been done on actual sponsors of a specific team. They further stated the importance of research on actual sponsors as the relationship between one team and the sponsor is always independent of another team and their sponsor. These hypothetical sponsors fail to give a specific insight into perceptions on team sponsorship, more specifically different levels of identified football fans.

2.5 Sports fan identification

As Gau, James and Kim (2009) articulated, team identification is identified as "a phenomenon associated with sport consumption" (p. 76). Ashforth and Mael (1989) have defined it as the perceived connectedness felt by the spectators and the sense of ownership they feel over the respective failings and achievements of their team. Other researchers such as Wann and Branscombe (1993) have defined team identification as one's level of involvement/emotional attachment about a specific sports team. It is important to note that this level of involvement or level of identification that a fan feels about a specific team varies from person to person. As Wann and Branscombe (1993) expressed, "it is quite obvious that some fans identify with a particular team more than other spectators" (p. 2).

Theorists have speculated that a fan's level of engagement and identification with a team may influence his/her perceptions. Lee and Ferreira (2013) noted that, according to previous literature (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), high-identified fans are more likely to have positive intentions towards the sponsors (company or
A consumer’s emotional connection or attachment to a sponsored property is outlined in terms of the social identity theory (Madrigal, 2001). The social identity theory iterates a group connection that is shared amongst other social groups that favour a particular team and in turn create a residual relationship. Pooley (1978) had suggested that moderate-identified fans simply observe a game or event and soon after forget about the results or incidences. A high-identified fan on the other hand, will take results or incidences in more consideration to the point of intensity that will spread throughout the days of his/her daily life, where that specific sports team becomes devotion.

Wann and Branscombe (1993) stated that the amount of identification with a team has the potential to exert several different effects on behaviour. Studies have argued that consumers who are perceived to be dedicated fans of a team would potentially lead to benefits for the sponsor in the form of additional patronage (Crimmins & Horn, 1996). It is often believed that high-identified fans live vicariously through their sponsored team and frequently identify with the success or failures, and in turn incorporate those associations towards their own personal life (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson & Kennedy, 1992).

The duration or the length of time that a person has been associated with an organisation may also play a role on a fan's identification. In previous studies (Bhattacharya, Rao & Glynn, 1995; Hall & Schneider, 1972; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), researchers found that people who have been actively involved and associated with an organization for a long period of time tend to identify themselves more positively with that organization. However, as Hall and Schneider (1972) noted, this positive association may gradually diminish over time.

Although there is currently much literature on fans' identification with teams, the majority of it has taken a general approach rather than understanding specific factors pertaining to
specific teams. As Norris, Wann and Zapalac (2015) noted, the motivational and situational factors of team identification have been well documented in sponsorship literature, yet even though fans support different teams, much of the literature still assumes that these underlying factors of identification are similar. Further research is needed to understand fans' identification towards a specific team and whether or not these factors can in fact be generalised across fans of all sports teams.

One way to understand a fans' identification with a specific team is through the use of the Sports Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS). The SSIS scale is a scale designed by Wann and Branscombe (1993) for the purposes of measuring the team identification of fans for a specific team, on a scale ranked from low-identified to high-identified. They noted, "numerous behavioural, cognitive and emotional reaction differences were observed for persons who differ in the degree to which they identify with a particular sports team" (p.10). Wann and Branscombe (1993) found that high-identified fans, when compared to a low or moderate-identified fan, were more involved and interested in the team, had more positive views on the team's present and future performance, saw other fans as special and felt that it was important for their friends to also be fans of the team. It was also said that high-identified fans would be the most knowledgeable fans for their preferred team. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) found that high-identified fans exhibit "positive sponsorship outcomes (e.g. patronage, increased satisfaction, positive attitude towards sponsoring brand)" (p. 287). Thus, some researchers have found that high-identified fans can add value to both the team and the sponsor. As different degrees of identification exist, it is important to take this into consideration when researching the perceptions of sponsorship fit.
3 Methodology

This chapter introduces the method and methodology chosen for this research. It introduces the specific methods used for sampling and data collection. In addition, the employed results of the qualitative analysis, and credibility of findings are discussed.

3.1 Research philosophy

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009), the research philosophy portrays the way in which a person views the world. It is a perspective through which the researcher approaches the research questions and interprets the findings. They further elaborate on four main philosophies that define the marketing research literature: interpretivism, positivism, realism, and pragmatism. In the case of this research, the authors chose to follow the path of a pragmatic research. The pragmatic research implies both an objective and subjective point of view and assumes that the researcher's view on reality is external and chosen to best enable answering defined research questions (Saunders et al., 2009). Furthermore, it involves both a quantitative and qualitative method of approach.

The reasoning towards utilizing the pragmatic philosophy is because the authors focused on exploring the research questions as to how the different levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans perceive the sponsor-team fit with Emirates Airlines. In addition to the pragmatic philosophy of a quantitative and qualitative method of approach, a scaling technique was used to capture the specific level of identified Arsenal FC fans. In turn, an in-depth interview was conducted to measure the fan's perception on the sponsor-team fit. Ultimately, the pragmatic philosophy allowed the authors to switch from one perspective to another with a purpose to help interpret the findings.

3.2 Research approach

The research approach examines how the theory is applied, which data collection methods are carried out and the level of finding's generalizability (Saunders et al., 2009). In a research approach, two constructs are identified: a deductive approach and an inductive approach. In order to follow the path of a deductive approach, one must develop a theory,
a hypothesis and design a strategy to test that hypothesis. In terms of an inductive approach, it exemplifies collecting data and potentially developing a theory based off the analysis. Furthermore, an inductive approach is based on learning from experiences; patterns, resemblances and regularities in experience are observed in order to reach conclusions (Saunders et al., 2009).

Saunders et al. (2009) however, argue of a third approach that exists: an abductive approach. This approach involves the use of a mixed method research design. It focuses on the particularities and not the generalizations of a specific situation, and can be used to comprehend phenomena in a new way through interpretation (Danemark, 2001). This research is guided by pragmatism and the perception of the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC, collecting samples using a quantitative component to facilitate the identification of an appropriate sample to answer the research questions, and then identifying the perceptions of those samples using a qualitative in-depth interview approach. From there, the results of the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans were taken into consideration to predict a probable conclusion. Despite having backed up theory within the frame of reference, the results were not always guaranteed. As can be seen in figure 3, the thesis is constructed from prior theoretical research, deviating those real-life observations with theory matching, and suggesting new theory with an application of conclusions. Thus, the authors chose to adopt the abductive approach.

![Abductive research process](image)

*Figure 2. Abductive research process (Kovács & Spens, 2005, p. 139)*
3.3  Research design

Malhotra, Birks and Wills (2007) define the research design as "a framework or blueprint for conducting a marketing research project" (p. 64). The aim of the research design is to therefore define the procedures followed in gathering the required data that allows the researcher to solve the marketing research problem.

In general, there are two ways to conduct a research design: through an exploratory study or conclusive study (Malhotra et al., 2007). An exploratory study means finding out "what is happening" (quote page number). It is sought out to seek new insights, ask questions and assess those questions into a phenomena (Saunders et al., 2009). In addition, it helps understanding the nature of a problem in which the researcher is unsure about. A conclusive study, on the other hand, is divided into two constructs: a descriptive study and an explanatory study. A descriptive study focuses on a more structured and planned out process of quantitative techniques like questionnaires or structured interviews in order to describe the characteristics of a particular group. In terms of an explanatory study, it ideally searches to establish causal relationships between variables, the emphasis on studying a situation or a problem. Furthermore, conclusive research, in contrast to exploratory research, is based on large and representative samples with the collected data being analysed using a quantitative analysis (Wilson, 1996).

Since there is a consistent base of literature and theoretical concepts that are elaborated throughout the frame of reference within this thesis, and the purpose is to figure out a specific phenomenon of a fan's perception toward the sponsor-team fit of Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC, this thesis withheld an exploratory approach. The exploratory approach is used in cases where the problem must be defined more precisely, and which courses of action should be identified (Saunders et al., 2009). The authors explored how the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC.

3.3.1  Qualitative & Quantitative

The fundamental objective behind an exploratory research design lies within its ability to serve as a means to understand or attempt to interpret certain phenomena. In an exploratory research design, the research data can be collected in one of two ways:
quantitative or qualitative research. Saunders et al. (2009) simplifies the two types of research by associating quantitative as numerical data and qualitative as non-numerical (words). However, Brannick and Roche (1997) have argued that it is weak to describe the difference between the two in terms of words and numbers. Rather, they define quantitative as the focus on the connection among "a number of clearly defined and measured attributes involving many cases" and qualitative as the focus on the connection among "many contextualised attributes involving relatively few cases" (Brannick & Roche, 1997, p. 2). In terms of data collection, quantitative data uses a structured approach whereas qualitative data generally adopts an unstructured or semi-structured data collection technique.

In the case of this research, the authors have opted to use both a quantitative and qualitative approach in order to discern the proposed research questions. For the quantitative component of the research, two separate scales were adapted to measure the fans' identification with Arsenal FC and the fans' identification of the sponsor-team fit with Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC. These scales were used to categorise the respondents based on their level of identification (high or low) with Arsenal FC and their identification with the sponsor-team fit. The qualitative component involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the participants that had identified themselves as either a high-identified or low-identified Arsenal FC fan. Through the use of the laddering technique, the authors aimed to explore the main research questions with the selected participants. The authors believed that in-depth interviews allowed for a more purposeful investigation of the relationship between the participants and their perceptions of the sponsor-team fit.

Though this research has adopted a quantitative method, the thesis still remained a qualitative study in nature. The quantitative questionnaire was implemented purely as an instrument to categorize the different levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden. The qualitative portions of in-depth interviews were aimed at obtaining a deeper understanding of the fan's perception of the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC. Therefore, with the advantages of the laddering technique, it helped stimulate the identified Arsenal FC fans to reflect upon their perception in a way unconnected from their usual perceptions (Malhotra et al., 2007).
3.4 Sampling design

Any successful report is defined through a sampling process in which the reader can understand how and why the specific samples were chosen in order to implement the research purpose. Malhotra et al. (2007) defines the sampling process in six basic steps:

![Sampling Design Process Diagram](image)

Figure 3. Sampling design process (Malhotra et al. 2007)

In the first step of the sampling process, a clear definition of the target population was expressed. It contains the collection of elements that possess the information caught on by the researcher, which inferences are then brought about. In order to support the effectiveness of the research, the elements of the target population must be clearly defined (Malhotra et al., 2007). In terms of this thesis, the target population were the different levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden. As mentioned in chapter 1.1, 22.45% of Swedish Premier League fans support Arsenal FC, making it the most popular team among Premier League supporters in Sweden.

When discussing the sampling frame, a representation of the elements of the target population were taken into consideration; it consists of a list or set of directions in which the target population will be identified (Malhotra et al., 2007). In regards to the research at hand, the authors designed and implemented their own sampling frame: a matrix in which the high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans were measured, placed and analysed based on perceptions.

In continuation with the sampling design, the third process involved selecting the sampling technique. According to Malhotra et al. (2007), there are two directions in which the researcher must decide whether to sample with or without replacement, and to
use non-probability or probability sampling. The first approach, the Bayesian approach, is where the elements are selected subsequently, where as in the traditional approach the whole sample is selected before the collection of data has started. In terms of differentiating between non-probability and probability sampling, non-probability sampling is based on the sole judgement of the researcher while probability sampling relies on pure chance (Saunders et al., 2009). For the purpose of this thesis, the authors opted for the traditional approach and non-probability sampling method due to the fact that the results of the identified Arsenal FC fan depended on their personal willingness to participate and their affiliation towards Arsenal FC.

**Sample size** refers to the number of elements that were included within the study. Determination of the sample size depends on several different factors including the nature of the research. For an exploratory research, which is the case for this thesis, relatively small samples were required (Malhotra et al., 2007). The authors achieved this result by reaching fans residing in Sweden, through various Arsenal FC Facebook groups, word of mouth, and social connections of the authors.

In the final **execution of the sampling process**, detailed specifications of the first four sampling design steps were implemented in order to guarantee the consistency of the whole process (Malhotra et al., 2007). With respect to the execution of the sampling process, the final step incorporated a **validation of the sample**. This step aimed at taking account for the sampling frame error by screening the respondents within the data collection phase (Malhotra et al., 2007). For this thesis, the authors executed the sampling steps by using the SSIS scale in order to provide a more defined target population of either high-identified or low-identified Arsenal FC fans, guaranteeing a strong valid sample.

Since the focus of the study was on different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden, the samples were not randomly selected. Instead, they were based on the researchers' subjective judgement, which is why the non-probability sampling method was chosen. Within this technique the judgemental sampling, also known as purposive sampling, was selected as the primary source of sampling. Judgemental sampling is "a form of convenience sampling in which the population elements are selected based on the judgement of the researcher" (Malhotra et al., 2007, p. 412). Several Arsenal FC fan pages such as Facebook and supporter groups based in Sweden were identified in order to reach the target
Finally, the authors adopted the snowball sampling method by asking Arsenal FC fans to pass the survey on to their fellow Arsenal FC fans. This method was implemented to strengthen the responses received.

Despite the fact that the judgemental and snowball sampling techniques are considered to be inexpensive, convenient and less time consuming, the authors acknowledge that it still contains certain limitations, for example the representative samples not being defined explicitly (Malhotra et al., 2007).

### 3.5 Data collection

Data collection in research is often split into two types of categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data, according to Malhotra et al. (2007), is data that is developed by the researcher in order to address the problem discussion at hand. Compared with other sources that provide available and relevant data, primary data collection tends to be more expensive and time consuming when it comes to analysing the results (Malhotra et al., 2007). Due to the nature of this research, the authors collected the primary data in two separate steps: online qualtrics identification survey and semi-structured interviews. These two steps are discussed further in the primary data section.

In terms of secondary data collection, the data has been collected from past studies or articles that are used for purposes other than the originated problem. Accordingly, these data or literature from past studies/articles can provide insights and information that can be utilized to develop or refine the research (Saunders et al., 2009).

#### 3.5.1 Secondary data

Past research has the ability to present insights and information that can be used to refine and develop the research (Saunders et al., 2009). In order to understand and define the proposed research topic, the authors have utilised past literature, both books and articles, in order to develop a frame of reference. The past literature was obtained through a combination of Jönköping University's trusted library database and Google Scholar's database. Academic journals have an important place in research as they can provide detailed, relevant and contemporary data on specific topics. However, as Saunders et al. (2009) noted, it is important to realise that some journals may contain elements of bias and
therefore this possibility of bias must be taken into careful consideration. The authors also chose to make use of academic books, as they provided a more substantial theoretical understanding to base the research upon. While searching for academic journals on the databases, the authors used numerous combinations of keywords and terms, some of these included sports sponsorship, sponsor fit, fan identification and sports sponsorship perceptions.

After a thorough and extensive examination of previous research on the related topic, the authors saw that the literature fell into two broad categories: sponsorship fit and fan identification. Under these two broad categories, a number of sub-constructs became apparent, all containing relevant and succinct data and academic research. Despite the fact that secondary data collection tends to fall under the quantitative method of approach, many issues need qualitative interpretation (Malhotra et al., 2007) in which this thesis was based upon. Therefore, the authors strongly believed that this specific data collection technique was beneficial for producing a comprehensive and structured frame of reference, resulting in research that was of a high standard in terms of quality and relevance.

3.5.2 Primary data (step one) – Fan identification process

The primary data consisted of two main sources: an online qualtrics identification survey and semi-structured interviews. The first source of data is related to the identification of Arsenal FC fans. This data was collected through an online qualtrics survey that was distributed among Arsenal FC supporters residing in Sweden. This survey had two scales: a sport spectator identification scale designed to measure the respondents identification with Arsenal FC and a sponsor-team fit scale designed to measure the respondents' identification with the sponsor-team fit. The data from the two scales were then collated into a matrix designed to plot the two aforementioned scales.

With a more clear understanding of how the research was conducted, the authors illustrated a basic step-by-step approach as outlined below:

**Step 1:** A qualtrics online survey was created and sent to Arsenal FC fans based in Sweden. The survey was designed as a tool to facilitate the identification of the fans. The survey was broken up into two categories: the fan's identification with the club and the fan's identification of sponsor-team fit.
Step 2: The results were then collected and plotted into an identification matrix, measuring the two dimensions: identification with the club and identification of sponsor-team fit. For the purpose of this research, moderate-identified Arsenal FC fans were excluded and the authors only selected respondents from the 1st and 3rd quadrant, which is further explained within this chapter.

Step 3: A sample of the respondents from the quadrants were then selected and invited to participate in interviews. The number of interviews was consistent with the sampling design process. The goal of these interviews was to establish an insight into the perceptions held by these different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans.

Step 4: Once the interviews were conducted, the authors finally analysed the data.

Figure 4. Illustration of step-by-step approach
3.5.2.1  **Sport spectator identification scale**

Within sports science literature, there lies two prominent measurement scales that have been used to identify a fan’s identification/commitment: Wann and Branscombe's (1993) Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) and Mahony, Madrigal and Howard's (2000) Psychological Commitment to Team Scale (PCTS). The SSIS scale is specifically designed to measure team identification while the PCTS scale looks at commitment. Wann and Pierce (2003) concluded that both the SSIS and PCTS scale measures were highly correlated and therefore most likely assessed a similar construct. They also deduced that the two scales appeared to be reliable and valid in terms of measuring and assessing a fan’s identification.

Wann, Melnick, Russell, and Pease (2001) have noted that the SSIS scale has proved itself to be a reliable measurement of identification across a number of studies in numerous countries. The authors' main reason for choosing to adopt the SSIS scale was due to its primary purpose as a fan identification scale and its ability to identify and assess the level of identification that each fan holds for their team. The SSIS scale allowed the authors to quantify the respondents' identification with Arsenal FC and therefore categorise the fans into two categories: high-identified fans and low-identified fans.

In order to categorise a fan's identification with the team (Arsenal FC), the authors chose to adapt the original scale designed by Wann and Branscombe (1993). This scale is comprised of 7 items and is scored using a Likert-scale format ranging from 1-8. In order to determine a level of identification, the responses from all seven items are summed to give a total score. The scale identifies three different levels of identification: scores less than 18 are considered to have a low level of identification, scores between 18 and 35 have a moderate level of identification and scores greater than 35 are considered to have a high level of identification.

As per the scale, the authors adopted questions 1 to 7 so that it relates to Arsenal FC. Question four was altered to include a fourth option that related to online media, since this scale was created in 1993 when there was little Internet access. The questions are as follows:
1. How important to you is it that Arsenal FC wins? (Not very important/Very important)
2. How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of Arsenal FC? (Not at all a fan/Very much a fan)
3. How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of Arsenal FC? (Not at all a fan/Very much a fan)
4. During the season, how closely do you follow Arsenal FC via any of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on the radio, c) television news or a newspaper, or d) any form of online media? (Never/Almost every day)
5. How important is being a fan of Arsenal FC to you? (Not important/Very important)
6. How much do you dislike Arsenal FC's greatest rivals? (Do not dislike/Dislike very much)
7. How often do you display Arsenal FC's name or insignia at your place of work, where you live or on your clothing? (Never/Always)

3.5.2.2 Sponsor-team fit scale

In order to measure the fan's identification with the sponsor-team fit, the widely used "sponsor-event fit" scale (Speed & Thompson, 2000) was incorporated. Although fit can be investigated on a number of different bases (namely functional or symbolic characteristics), the authors chose to follow Speed and Thompson's (2000) approach and investigate fit in terms of a single construct. Therefore, a more general focus on the fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC was adopted with the construct aiming to understand the attitudes of the respondents towards this fit and how it was perceived. The authors further adapted this scale in a way to measure fit in terms of Arsenal FC rather than an event. This scale is comprised of five items and was scored using a 8-point Likert-scale as follows:

1. There is a logical connection between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC.
2. The image of Emirates Airlines and the image of Arsenal FC are similar.
3. Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC fit well together.
4. Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC stand for similar things.
5. It makes sense to me that Emirates Airlines sponsors Arsenal FC
3.5.2.3 **Matrix: identification with the team vs. Identification of sponsor-team fit**

The authors endeavoured to investigate how high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive the club's fit with the sponsor Emirates Airlines. Therefore, the authors chose to examine the identification with the team (fan identification) and identification with the sponsor-team fit as a bi-dimensional construct. As Fleck and Quester (2007) alluded to, most literature on sponsorship congruence assumes a one-dimensional construct. Through using two separate scales to measure the two dimensions, the authors plotted all respondents into four different categories:

1. Low team identification, low identification with sponsor-team fit
2. Low team identification, high identification with sponsor-team fit
3. High team identification, high identification with sponsor-team fit
4. High team identification, low identification with sponsor-team fit

The following matrix was implemented to further explore the identified Arsenal FC fan's perception towards the fit of Emirates Airlines with Arsenal FC.

*Figure 5. Identification matrix*
In accordance, the authors had a particular interest with the respondents who fell within quadrants 1 and 3. Quadrant 1 related to the fans that possessed a low level of identification with Arsenal FC and perceived Emirates Airlines to have a low sponsor-team fit. Quadrant 3 represented the opposite end of the scale with fans that possessed a high level of identification with Arsenal FC and a high perception of the sponsor-team fit with Emirates Airlines.

3.5.3 Primary data (step two) – Semi-structured interviews

The second source of primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews. The participants for these interviews were selected based on their results of the identification survey obtained from the identification matrix in step one.

3.5.3.1 Semi-structured, in-depth interviews

Qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviews are structured/unstructured, direct, and a personal interview in which the respondent is probed in order to discover, in rich detail, more about the individual's opinions, beliefs, attitudes and emotional attachment (Malhotra et al., 2007). Kahn and Cannell (1957) describe interviewing as "a conversation with a purpose" (p. 149). They provide meaning through interpretations and not necessarily “facts” given by the respondent (Kvale, 1996; Johnson, 2002). Even though a lack of structure can influence the results in being susceptible to the interviewee, it still uncovers a great depth of insight, more so than focus groups (Malhotra et al., 2007).

In-depth interviewing is about uncovering a participant's perspective on a specific phenomenon of interest, while recognising the outcome as descriptive, instead of a predictive reaction. Therefore, the authors of this thesis induced on adopting a semi-structured in-depth interview approach in order to get a more descriptive result from the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans.

A semi-structured approach was adopted as it allowed the authors to follow a consistent question structure, while also granting the freedom to follow up questions and further discussions. In combination with this, the authors chose to adopt a laddering technique to their line of questioning. Malhotra et al. (2007) defines the laddering technique as a semi-
structured interview using consistent and highly structured questions, but still interspersed with open-ended questions to provide a more sufficient variation of responses.

3.5.3.2 Conduction of semi-structured interviews

Interviews were carried out with the intentions of gaining a deeper understanding of the research topic. The authors specifically chose in-depth interviews in order to explore a small number of participants, while the semi-structured format allowed the possibility to probe various questions on an interview-to-interview basis.

To ensure that the line of questioning for each interview was consistent, the authors used the same questionnaire template that contained an ordered list of the constructs and their respective questions. A copy of this questionnaire template can be found in Appendix A. This questionnaire template was present at each interview that was conducted. The choice of the semi-structured questions allowed the authors the luxury of facilitating discussion beyond the constraints of the original questions, while ensuring the conversation remained on topic. For this reason, the authors remained attentive and pursued follow-up questions when the appropriate and necessary time originated. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the authors obtained a degree of flexibility that allowed them to pursue a line of investigation that may not have been initially thought of.

In terms of the quantity of conducted interviews, the authors interviewed a total of 10 Arsenal FC fans located in Sweden over a period of nine days. The interviews were conducted either in-person or via Skype, with both authors present for all interviews. In an ideal situation, the authors would have preferred all of the interviews to have taken place in-person, yet due to time constraints and the scope of the research including all Arsenal FC supporters in Sweden, this would have proved far too challenging. However, Skype proved a very useful tool in combating the geographical issue of participants living in different cities throughout Sweden, while still allowing the authors to conduct reliable and effective interviews. Regardless of the interview mode, all participants appeared to be relaxed and willing to engage in further discussion about the topic of research at hand.

During the process, the role of transcribing and interviewing was shared evenly between the authors while each and every interview was recorded, with the permission of the participant. Both the authors were mindful in allowing the participant the appropriate time
to think and repeat or rephrase questions if needed; yet refrained from interrupting or disrupting the conversation. All interviews conducted lasted between 30 – 60 minutes, with an average duration of about 40 minutes per interview. All specific details pertaining to the participants can be found in table 2. It should be noted that all participants remained anonymous; rather the authors’ allocated labels correlating to their level of identification and the order of the interview, hence H1 refers to the first participant interviewed as a high-identified Arsenal FC fan and so forth.

3.5.3.3 Interview participants

The data from the online qualtrics identification survey were collected and plotted into a matrix, resulting in four defined quadrants. As part of the survey, the respondents were asked to fill in their contact details if they were willing to participate in a follow up interview. The authors then isolated all respondents within the quadrants of interest, and contacted those who were willing to participate in follow up interviews via email.

Every individual qualitative study is different; therefore the number of participants required varies from research to research. For this reason, the most common approach to determining the sample size relies on the notion of 'saturation', which is defined as "the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006, p. 59). For the purpose of this research, the authors chose to interview an even number of high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans until a point of data 'saturation' was encountered, rather than setting a specific number of interviews. This point of data 'saturation' was found through conducting 10 interviews with five high-identified Arsenal FC fans and five low-identified Arsenal FC fans. These interviews led to a substantial understanding of the perception of the sponsor-team fit from the perspective of both high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans.

Due to the specific nature of the research, only a small number of participants were required to explore the research question at hand. Furthermore, as the interviewed participants had already participated in an online survey, the authors had already established the fans' level of identification with Arsenal FC and their identification with the sponsor-team fit of Emirates Airlines with Arsenal FC. Therefore, the survey identified a number of possible participants who fit into the quadrants of interest, leading to a reliable pool from which the authors carefully selected their sample.
3.5.3.4 Analysing the empirical data

Following the 10 interviews, the authors had compiled over 400 minutes of empirical data, which subsequently needed to be coordinated and sorted before an analysis could be conducted. As part of this organization period, all the interviews were fully transcribed into word documents allowing the authors to fully explore and code the data. In order to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the data, the authors undertook a co-coding process by which individual coding was conducted, then the perspectives of both authors were discussed. Once this co-coding process was completed, the authors systematically made a comparison of each individual interview allowing for a more comprehensive analysis to be made.

The data was coded using a thematic analysis approach that looked at key themes. King and Horrocks (2010) define themes as "recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the research sees as relevant to the research question" (p. 150). Therefore, key themes, quotes, opinions and observations from each transcribed interview, that were thought to be relevant to the research question, were highlighted. The key themes highlighted during the coding process were benefits of sponsorship, sponsorship portfolio diversity, perceptions of sponsor-team fit, and sports fan identification.

An example of how this coding was conducted can be seen in the example response from participant L1. During the coding process, this quote was highlighted under the theme of both benefits of sponsorship and sponsorship portfolio diversity. So when these themes are further analysed, the authors were able to draw upon this data.

"You are familiar with Fly Emirates since they have done so much sponsorship, which means you know so much more about Emirates, which means you trust Emirates more than another airline." – Participant L1

This coding process presented an important step in the analysis of the empirical data collected. Through identifying key themes and quotes, the authors were able to easily establish connections between the data and theory presented in the frame of reference.
3.6 Trustworthiness

In order for the research to be considered trustworthy, it is essential for the authors to be both objective and sensitive when conducting the in-depth interviews and analysing the data (Malhotra et al., 2007). Researchers often question the trustworthiness of qualitative research, due to the fact that the concepts of validity and reliability cannot be addressed in the same manner as naturalistic research (Shenton, 2004). Guba (1981) has proposed four criteria towards providing sufficient backup to the trustworthiness of a qualitative study as follows:

- **Credibility** (in preference to internal validity)
- **Transferability** (in preference to external validity/generalizability)
- **Dependability** (in preference to reliability)
- **Confirmability** (in preference to objectivity)

These four constructs were elaborately defined and implemented towards the case of this thesis in order to ensure full trustworthiness.

3.6.1 Credibility

In order to ensure that a study measures or tests what is actually intended within a qualitative research approach, the credibility of the proposed work must be sufficient (Shenton, 2004). It visualizes the question of how congruent the findings are with reality. Some strategies that were utilized by the authors were taking advantage of the communication and discussions that were undergone amongst the classmates in the thesis seminars. In addition, the thesis supervisor provided sufficient support and feedback towards the research at hand.

In terms of the thesis, the authors made sure that the identified Arsenal FC fans were probed, which allowed for sensitive data to be elicited. It can also be noted that within in-depth interviews, the laddering technique incorporates a further understanding of the identified fan's view towards a specific topic, creating a mental map. This strategy was taken into consideration by the authors of this thesis when making careful distinctions that applied towards the analysis and interpretation of a qualitative approach (Huberman & Miles, 2002).
3.6.2 Transferability

The concern of transferability often lies in demonstrating that the results of the research can be applied or adapted to an extensive populace (Shenton, 2004). Huberman and Miles (2002) further question the transferability of whether the study acknowledges the scope and boundaries. Since qualitative research only involves a small number of participants in the sampling process, it is generally very difficult to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions can be applicable to other situations or populations (Shenton, 2004). However, Firestone (1993) states that it’s up to the researcher to endorse whether or not it’s feasible to apply the findings of a research towards a larger population or case scenario.

Shenton (2004) further specifies that in order to assess the extent to which findings may be true in other situations, similar projects employing the same methods but conducted in different environments could suffice great value. Since this thesis delimited its sample to Sweden, it can be noted that this thesis can of course be directed to a different country, with an even larger population.

3.6.3 Dependability

In terms of dependability, the researcher employs techniques to show that, if the research were to be repeated, in the same context, with the same methodological approach and sampling design, the study would attain comparable results (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, with this thesis providing extensive information and structure about the research philosophy, approach and design, certifies a prerequisite outline for future researchers to attain similar findings. However, it must be noted that this study was conducted using a qualitative approach and the authors have utilized the laddering technique as a predefined strategy, which, according to Saunders et al. (2009), is a good way to follow up with open-ended questions within in-depth interviews.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Finally, the last construct of determining a trustworthy research, involves confirming the research at hand. The concept of confirmability is the qualitative researcher's comparable concern to objectivity (Shenton, 2004). Within this idea, steps must be taken in order to help ensure that the study's findings are the result of experiences and ideas of the interviewed fans, rather than the preferences of the authors (Huberman & Miles, 2002).
The authors provided a descriptive and detailed methodological background, which hopefully allowed the reader to evaluate whether or not the data was consistent with the stated arguments.

Furthermore, the authors ensured that all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed fully in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the fans' perceptions. Lastly, critical to the process of confirmability explained by Shenton (2004), is the "audit trail" (p. 72), which allows the observer to follow the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures, described. The authors of this thesis provided a detailed illustration of the steps towards gathering the specified levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans, and in turn how these fans were questioned and probed in order to identify their perceptions.
4 Empirical Findings

In this chapter, the empirical findings are presented. Firstly, the results from the SSIS scale evaluation are presented. Secondly, the credibility of the utilized scale is measured and discussed. Finally, revealing the specific perceptions of the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans, further enriches the data collected from the in-depth interviews.

4.1 SSIS scale evaluation

A qualtrics online survey was sent out to a variety of Arsenal FC fans in Sweden. These fans were located through various Arsenal FC Facebook groups, word of mouth and social connections of the authors. The survey collected general data about the respondents (age, gender, location, etc.) and then presented two sets of questions that identified the respondent's identification with the team and the identification with the sponsor-team fit. All of the survey data was then downloaded and analysed using Microsoft Excel. This process included removing all incomplete results, filtering out fans that didn't live in Sweden and then associating the fans with a level of identification as per the SSIS scale. As this study pertains to high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans, the authors removed any fan that fell within the moderate-identified fan category.

The survey was distributed to Arsenal FC fans via a number of different channels, namely Facebook fan pages of various Swedish cities (e.g. Arsenal Sweden Jönköping and Arsenal Sweden Stockholm). These fan pages consisted of both male and female members; therefore, the channels of distribution were not gender biased. However, during this analysis of the identification survey, the authors noted that 83% of the total respondents were male. It must be noted that the Premier League is a league exclusively for men, while the Football Association Women's Super League is a league exclusively for women. Therefore, the authors believe that this may have contributed to the breakdown of male and female respondents.

The total number of responses received from the Arsenal FC fans in Sweden was 104. Of these 104 Arsenal FC fans, 17 filed as incomplete, a further 3 no longer lived in Sweden and 16 were omitted since these fans fell within the moderate-identified fan category. Once this process was completed, the remaining 68 Arsenal FC fans' results were then plotted on
a scatter plot. From this scatter plot, which can be viewed in figure 7, the authors chose five high-identified and five low-identified fans for further interviews. These fans were chosen from quadrants 1 and 3, as these quadrants possessed fans with complete opposite identifications with both Arsenal FC and the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC.

![Figure 6. Revised scatter plot](image)

### 4.2 Interview findings

As discussed in section 3.5.3.4, all empirical data collected were subsequently put through a coding process. This important step lead to the identification of key themes and quotes, which allowed the authors to easily establish any connections between the data collected and the theory presented in the frame of reference. The key themes highlighted during the coding process were **benefits of sponsorship**, **sponsorship portfolio diversity**, **perception of sponsor-team fit**, and **sports fan identification**.

Table 2 summarises all the interviewed participants. The duration of all the interviews conducted totalled over 400 minutes, with an average duration of around 40 minutes for each interview. All participants have been allocated a letter and a number that represents their level of identification and interview order. Throughout the empirical findings, the authors refer to the participants by their corresponding letter and number. The table also
lists each participant's identification score, which was calculated from the online surveys that were completed prior to the interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Identification</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place of Residence</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Identification score (SSIS, Sponsor-team fit)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High (H1)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Jönköping, Sweden</td>
<td>39 min</td>
<td>46, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (H2)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Halmstad, Sweden</td>
<td>52 min</td>
<td>36, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (H3)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Jönköping, Sweden</td>
<td>39 min</td>
<td>41, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (H4)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Stockholm, Sweden</td>
<td>40 min</td>
<td>49, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High (H5)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Jönköping, Sweden</td>
<td>41 min</td>
<td>40, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (L1)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Jönköping, Sweden</td>
<td>38 min</td>
<td>16, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (L2)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Värnamo, Sweden</td>
<td>35 min</td>
<td>10, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (L3)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Stockholm, Sweden</td>
<td>39 min</td>
<td>7, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (L4)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Jönköping, Sweden</td>
<td>45 min</td>
<td>10, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (L5)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Jönköping, Sweden</td>
<td>33 min</td>
<td>12, 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Participants' interview clarification

4.2.1 Benefits of sponsorship

Table 3 (located on the next page) illustrates the authors’ attempt to understand the perceived benefits that result from sports sponsorship. Three consecutive questions were asked to each participant. The first question looked at the benefits for Arsenal FC, the second looked at the benefits for Emirates Airlines, and the third question focused on
which party benefited the most from this relationship. These questions had been designed with the intentions of identifying whether or not the level of fan identification played a major role in a fan’s perception of sponsorship benefits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Benefits Arsenal</th>
<th>Benefits Emirates Airlines</th>
<th>Party benefiting most</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Financial support (players, equipment), stadium</td>
<td>Exposure, naming rights, merchandise</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Financial support (Salary for players), big sponsor (Real Madrid, PSG)</td>
<td>Sponsoring successful teams, big players for endorsements</td>
<td>Arsenal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>More success, retain and buy good players, large stadium, financial support</td>
<td>Brand awareness - connection to a stadium, associate Arsenal with Emirates – brand loyalty</td>
<td>Arsenal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Free flights, company connections from Emirates, financial support, stadium</td>
<td>Reaching new audiences, brand awareness</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Sign players, develop players, financial support</td>
<td>Awareness, word of mouth</td>
<td>Arsenal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Financial support, knowledge of operating a global company, global awareness</td>
<td>Exposure, awareness</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Financial support, flights</td>
<td>Jersey awareness</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3</td>
<td>Financial support (better equipment, locations, salary)</td>
<td>Awareness, Alignment with a good team</td>
<td>Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4</td>
<td>Financial support (new players, salary)</td>
<td>Exposure</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L5</td>
<td>Financial support, global awareness</td>
<td>Awareness – connection to a stadium, shirt exposure</td>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Participants’ perception of sponsorship benefits**

In terms of high-identified fans, all five of the participants mentioned that Arsenal FC’s greatest benefit could be seen in terms of financial gain. Interestingly enough, four participants mentioned the financial benefits relating directly to players, namely the ability to retain or buy new players. It should be noted that even though H4 didn't mention the benefits of players when asked this question, they still alluded to this benefit earlier in the interview.
“...become more successful in the league due to transfers to their own team, keeping players within the team and being able to provide a better contract for those good players.” – Participant H3

When asked to explain who benefited the most from this sponsorship deal, three of the five high-identified fans stated Arsenal FC, whereas the other two said it was an equally benefiting deal. Considering these participants had scored high on the SSIS scale, it is logical that they would see Arsenal FC as the main beneficiary of this sponsorship deal.

"I think it's equal because they have been together for so long now.” – Participant H1

In terms of low-identified Arsenal FC fans, all five mentioned that Arsenal FC benefited in terms of financial support while Emirates Airlines received benefits in the form of awareness and exposure. When asked which one benefited the most from this sponsorship deal, all low-identified fans except one agreed that the benefits were shared equally between Arsenal FC and Emirates Airlines. Participant L3 said that Emirates Airlines benefited the most from this relationship, the only participant to have this point of view.

“I'm guessing that Emirates Airlines benefits more because so many people have heard about Arsenal FC and everyone refers to Arsenal FC through Emirates Airlines.” – Participant L3

4.2.2 Sponsorship portfolio diversity

The authors wanted to see whether or not Emirates Airline's vast majority of sponsorship deals within their sponsorship portfolio played a specific role towards the perception of the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans. All of the participants perceived Emirates Airlines positively due to its large sponsorship portfolio. It’s important to note that H5 identified that this is true up until a certain number of sponsorship deals.

“...I think it is nice to sponsor a few clubs, but not more than that.” – Participant H5

"In their opinion, I think it's great. They get a lot of space to be seen around Arsenal. It's the major sponsor, so of course it's a positive thing to show that they want to be a part of something big, not just with Arsenal.” – Participant H2
"I would say they are more committed if they sponsor a large number of categories." – Participant L3

All of the identified participants positively perceived a sponsor who occupies a wide range of sponsorship categories within their portfolio. It was stated that the diversity within the sponsorship portfolio could influence brand awareness and present a strong company that is able to provide a significant amount of financial support towards the club. All high-identified Arsenal FC fans were extra perceptive to this construct as it contributes to the potential of Arsenal FC remaining as a top tier football team in the future.

It was noted that amongst the low-identified Arsenal FC fans, the responses appeared to vary from participant to participant. The variance can be seen in terms of lack of appreciation or care towards Emirates Airlines. For example, L5 was clearly disinterested in the sponsorship portfolio diversity.

"I don't think it would change my perception at all. It doesn't matter to me because I perceive Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC the same as any other club or sponsor." – Participant L5

After careful exploration, the authors managed to discover that all of the fans had experienced awareness of Emirates Airlines through either Arsenal FC as a club, Arsenal FC's stadium, or another form of activity/event sponsored by Emirates Airlines. Due to the fact that Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC have been together for such a long duration, all of the participants deemed their fit to be logical.

"The Emirates Stadium is such a massive thing and also having them on the front of the shirt makes them seem very prevalent and a lot more engaged. So it definitely makes me think better of the sponsor if they stick around longer." – Participant H4

"...they are working with orphanages in Africa. So they are definitely trying to be the best, not only just in airplanes. It seems like they are also making possibilities for children who are struggling. So by Emirates creating more awareness around the world with this portfolio, it becomes much more trustworthy." – Participant H2

"Because the Emirates Airlines has been with Arsenal for so long, I do believe that they have the club's best interests at heart. I always think of Arsenal when I see Emirates." – Participant L4
"I think they have a partnership that has existed for a long time, for a couple of years at least. Yeah and of course, what you connect automatically is the Emirates Stadium. I think the term Emirates is more present than it would have been with just the shirt sponsor, I would say that they stadium sponsorship increases brand awareness." — Participant L1

It can be noted that all 10 participants revealed a positive relationship between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC due to their long spanning partnership. Due to Emirates Airline’s extensive portfolio of sponsorship deals, they have become a recognisable sponsor among sporting fans, especially Arsenal FC fans. This leads to the idea that the duration of a relationship creates a strong trust amongst the sponsor that wants to help support the club, even if the club can go through its ups and downs within different periods.

4.2.3 Perception of sponsor-team fit

In order to understand the participants' perception of the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC, the authors first sought to understand their perceptions on a more general level. This was achieved by listing six other sponsorship deals within the Premier League and asking the participants to comment on whether they were logical in terms of fit or not. This process would allow the authors to gain an insight into what factors contributed to the participants forming their attitudes towards the sponsor-team fit and why it was or wasn’t deemed logical. Following from these general perceptions, the authors then sought to understand the sponsor-team fit on a more specific level. Both the general and specific perceptions of sponsor-team fit are explained in the following sections.

4.2.3.1 General perception of sponsor-team fit: Six Premier League deals

In order to understand the participants' perceptions of sponsorship fits within the Premier League, the authors listed six different sponsorship deals that were currently present. Each sponsorship deal was then asked to be commented upon as to whether they saw it is a logical fit or not. The six sponsors included Chevrolet (US car company), Yokohama (Japanese tire company), Etihad Airways (another United Arab Emirates airline), AIA (Chinese insurance company), Betway (Maltese betting company) and Chang (Thai beer company). The question was designed to see if the perceptions of high-identified and low-
identified Arsenal FC fans had any significant differences or similarities, particularly when looking at a number of different companies, varying in size, country of origin and industry.

The responses from all 10 participants were collected and inserted into table 4. The table was colour coded according to whether the participants saw a logical fit between the particular team and their sponsor; Green represented yes, red represented no and white represented undecided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Chevrolet</th>
<th>Yokohama</th>
<th>Etihad Airways</th>
<th>AIA</th>
<th>Betway</th>
<th>Chang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Yes, American owner</td>
<td>No, Money</td>
<td>Yes, UAE owner</td>
<td>No, Only money</td>
<td>No, Long time &amp; beer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Yes, Money</td>
<td>Yes, Money</td>
<td>Undecided, Since team is going ok</td>
<td>No, Gambling</td>
<td>No, Beer = unethical sponsor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Yes, UK people like US cars</td>
<td>No, Makes no sense</td>
<td>Yes, Good for money</td>
<td>No, Doesn't make sense</td>
<td>Yes, Soccer and betting</td>
<td>Yes, Beer is big in the UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Yes, Their cars are sold in the UK</td>
<td>No, Don't see the logic</td>
<td>Yes, Same as Chevy – Fly in the UK</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Undecided, Never heard of them</td>
<td>Yes, I can relate to beer and football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Yes, Lots of US fans</td>
<td>Yes, Lots of Asian fans</td>
<td>No, Sponsor unknown</td>
<td>Undecided, Maybe a good fit</td>
<td>Undecided, Maybe a good fit</td>
<td>No, Beer = Unethical sponsor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Yes, American owner</td>
<td>No, About the money</td>
<td>Yes, CEO owner</td>
<td>Undecided, Raising UK awareness</td>
<td>Yes, Sport is about bets</td>
<td>Yes, Long time sponsor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Yes, American owner</td>
<td>No, About the money</td>
<td>Yes, Similar to Arsenal</td>
<td>No, Company unknown</td>
<td>No, Company unknown</td>
<td>Yes, Thai owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3</td>
<td>Undecided, Money</td>
<td>Undecided, New market venture</td>
<td>Yes, Pure money</td>
<td>Undecided, New market venture</td>
<td>Yes, Lots of bets in sport</td>
<td>Yes, From a fans point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4</td>
<td>No, American brand</td>
<td>Undecided, But better than Chevy</td>
<td>No, Sponsor unknown</td>
<td>No, Sponsor unknown</td>
<td>Yes, Sport and betting</td>
<td>No, UK beer company makes more sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4. Participants’ perceptions of six Premier League sponsorship deals*
1. **Chevrolet & Manchester United FC**

All five of the high-identified fans saw a logical fit between Chevrolet and Manchester United. In terms of determining whether the sponsor was a logical fit or not, four participants referred to the US (the home of Chevrolet) or the UK (the home of Manchester United).

"I think they have a lot of fans in the US, which can help [Manchester] United moving forward in the US." – Participant H5

"It's logical because the owners are American." – Participant H1

The low identified fans had less unity in their perception of the fit being logical. L1 and L2 stated that it was logical due to Chevrolet being sponsored by an American; L4 and L5 stated that it wasn't logical, and L3 wasn't sure since it was mainly about the money.

"Chevrolet is a very American brand and maybe the fit would not be as good since it's an English team." – Participant L4

"Manchester United is owned by an American family and Chevrolet is an America company." – Participant L1

2. **Yokohama & Chelsea FC**

The fit between Yokohama and Chelsea FC was perceived logical by two (H2 and H5) of the five high-identified fans. Where as the other three high-identified fans saw no logical fit between the team and sponsor.

"I would say I don't really see the logic." – Participant H4

"I think football in Asia...they have a lot of supporters there. I think that it is a great sponsor for them (Chelsea FC) to create awareness." – Participant H5
Unlike the high-identified Arsenal FC fans, none of the low-identified fans perceived Yokohama to be a logical fit. Rather, L1 and L2 saw it more about the money and therefore not a logical fit, whereas the other three low-identified fans couldn't decide on whether the fit was logical or not.

"Yokohama maybe wants to raise their presence in Europe so people are more aware of Yokohama tires. So they use Chelsea [FC]." – Participant L1

3. **Etihad Airways & Manchester City FC**

Of the six different sponsorship deals, the fit between Etihad Airways and Manchester City FC is the most similar to that of Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC's sponsorship. In terms of the high-identified fans, four of the five thought that this sponsorship deal was a logical fit; H2 and H3 associating the fit to money, H1 alluding to the owner having ties to United Arab Emirates (where Etihad Airways is located), and H4 alluding to the fact that Etihad Airways operates in the UK. However, H5 was unable to see a logical connection due to the fact that they didn't know what Etihad Airways was.

"I think that Manchester City's owner is from UAE, so yeah it's probably a good sponsor for them as well, involving a lot of money." – Participant H5

"They both [Arsenal FC and Manchester City FC] have the jersey and the stadium sponsor...and I think it's good." – Participant H2

The attitudes of the low-identified fans were similar to that of the high-identified fans, with four of the five perceiving the fit to be logical. The one low-identified fan (L4) who didn't perceive a logical fit, also was not aware of Etihad Airways as a company. The four low-identified fans who perceived it to be a logical fit, had varied reasons: L1 stated it was logical due to the CEO of Etihad Airways owning Manchester City FC, L2 deduced a logical fit as it's similar to the relationship between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC, L3 saw it as logical fit due to the money and L5 simply stated it was a logical fit.
"I really don't like Manchester City [FC] and I have never heard of the airline." – Participant L4

"Definitely a logical fit because the owner of the club is CEO of Etihad." – Participant L1

4. AIA & Tottenham FC

Both high-identified and low-identified fans perceived the sponsorship deal as either not logical or a somewhat logical fit. In terms of the high-identified fans' perceptions, three of the five saw no logical fit with H1 assuming it was only about money, H3 claimed it made no sense since it was not a UK based insurance company and H4 simply saw no logical fit. The other two high-identified fans were undecided on the perceived fit with H2 not knowing who the sponsor was, but assumed they had something to do with Tottenham FC's recent success and H5 being impartial of the fit being logical due to being unaware of the sponsor.

"To be honest, I didn't know what they did, or what they are for a company. Maybe a more well-known sponsor is better for them?" – Participant H5

"I've never heard of it, but the other teams I have. As an Arsenal [FC] fan, it is tough to admit, but I think that Tottenham have something good going and I think the sponsor clearly has something to do with it." – Participant H2

The perceptions of the low-identified Arsenal FC fans were similar to that of the high-identified fans, with three of them seeing no fit, while the other two were undecided on their perceptions of a logical fit. Of the 3 low-identified fans that perceived no logical fit, L2 and L4 were unaware of AIA as a business, while L5 simply saw no logical fit. The two low-identified fans that were undecided on the perception of the fit saw it as an attempt at international expansion, with L1 referring to raising awareness in Asia and L3 as an international company entering a new market.

"I think it comes down to whether I know the company or not, and in this case I don't." – Participant L4
"I don't like the team [Tottenham FC] and I don't know about the company [AIA]." – Participant L2

5. Betway & West Ham United FC

The high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived this fit in a number of ways. Out of the five high-identified fans, only H3 perceived this fit as logical, alluding to the idea that betting is a rational activity in the contexts of football. H4 and H5 were both undecided on whether they perceived the fit as logical with H4 not having heard about the company and H5 not being sure, but suggesting it could be a good sponsor since other football teams also carry betting companies as their shirt sponsor. The other two high-identified fans who didn't see any logical fit was H1 who thought it was only a matter of money and H2 who believed betting was unethical within the contexts of football.

"I don't think teams should have betting companies as their major sponsor...It is an ethical thing and I believe that West Ham [United FC] should try and get another sponsor." – Participant H2

"I think this is a good fit because we have soccer and betting...works well together!" – Participant H3

Unlike the high-identified fans, four out of the five low-identified fans perceived the fit between West Ham United FC and Betway as logical. L1, L3 and L4 all stated that the sponsor-team fit was a logical fit since betting is very common and prevalent within the context of sport, while L5 simply stated that it was a logical fit. However, L2 didn't see a logical fit, as they did not know the sponsor.

"Yeah of course, sports is about betting so why not." – Participant L1

"That absolutely makes sense, you always see lots of betting companies in the TV commercials and around the games...It makes sense to remind people that maybe they should make a bet on the game, and I think a lot of spectators relate betting with sport. Probably the best fit so far!" – Participant L4
6. **Chang Beer & Everton FC**

The perception of this sponsor-team fit was seen as both logical and illogical by high-identified fans. Three of the five saw the fit as logical with H1 identifying the long-term relationship of the sponsor, as well as beer being a logical fit with football, H3 stated that beer was big in the UK and hence logical, and lastly H4 just related the fit to beer and football. However, H2 and H5 didn't see the fit as logical, highlighting that it's unethical for a beer company to sponsor a football team.

"I can relate beer to English football because back in the day heaps of beer sponsors were sponsoring football clubs..." – Participant H4

"...if a child who is 5 or 6 years old and buys a shirt that has a beer company on it, then maybe it's stupid...it would be unethical to sell shirts to kids who support the game and are promoting alcohol." – Participant H5

When the low-identified fans were asked to state whether or not this sponsor-team fit was logical, three out of the five agreed it was. L1 stated it was logical due to the fact they had been a long-term sponsor, L2 alluded that it was logical because they understood that the owner of Everton FC had connections to Thailand and L3 saw it as a logical fit from a fan's or spectator's point of view. L4 and L5 however, didn't see a logical fit with L4 stating that a UK beer company would be more appropriate and L5 simply stating that it wasn't logical.

"From a spectators' point of view, I would connect it." – Participant L3

"I love Chang beer. Probably not so much a fit, British people love beer so it would make more sense for a British brewery to sponsor Everton." – Participant L4

4.2.3.2 **Specific perception of sponsor-team fit: Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC**

With the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC being the main point of discussion throughout the thesis, the authors wanted to further identify if any
differences or similarities existed among the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans. Interestingly enough, when asked a few questions about how they perceived the relationship between Emirates Airlines and whether it was a logical fit or not, all of the participants agreed to some extent that having a big successful company does help. In the case of Arsenal FC, capital is important towards the club's growth in terms of providing quality equipment and training grounds, signing new big name players, and being able to provide good wages to everyone in the club to potentially extend their contracts. This therefore contributes to the club and their pursuit of sustaining a successful and prosperous football club.

"The capital definitely helps because it improves their facilities, their ability to build a team, it buys coaches and the players. It also builds a better foundation for the club as well, so like your stadiums and stuff for the fans." – Participant H4

"I think it has to be internationally successful, that's one point. Another characteristic is that they have really high revenue in order to pay for new players and financially assist Arsenal." – Participant H3

"It's about the company that gives the best deal, and the best money." – Participant L2

"...the club needs financial supplies so they can become better as a club." – Participant L5

Leading more towards the main research questions relating to Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC, the authors posed two questions one after the other in an attempt to see if perceptions differed based on the different levels of fan identification. The first question asked the participant to explain whether the fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC was a logical fit or not. This question was followed up with whether or not they felt Emirates Airlines was a sincere sponsor. When asked whether they saw Emirates Airlines as a logical fit, all 10 participants agreed that the fit was perceived as logical as can be interpreted in table 5 (located on the next page).
Table 5. Participants’ perceptions on Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC’s fit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Emirates Airlines &amp; Arsenal FC perceived logical fit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Yes. Not in beginning but duration has made it one. Now you relate Emirates with Arsenal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Yes. Due to money, Emirates donating to charities, Flying, great exposure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Yes. Good connection. Top team with quality company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Yes. Travelling (flying) makes it logical. Plus a long duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Yes. Great connection together. Plane endorsements for Asian tour – showed a lot of support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Yes. Duration. Financial support. Important because Arsenal want to grow globally. Mutual relationship – same values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2</td>
<td>Yes. Emirates provide sponsorship to big clubs. Plus resigned a deal so must be good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L3</td>
<td>Yes. A way to connect to both local and international supporters. Emirates promotes both their company and the team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L4</td>
<td>Yes. Transportation (flying). Doesn’t care about country of origin. Can’t remember previous sponsor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L5</td>
<td>Yes. Premium company &amp; premium club.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"I know that they are pretty involved in Arsenal and the Cup and all those other events in the pre-season, so it’s definitely positive." – Participant H1

"I haven’t heard of any scandals that Emirates have been in and I know that Arsenal is not a club that has had many big scandals like other European teams such as Real Madrid going on – no fancy players doing fancy things." – Participant L1

Interestingly enough, when asked whether they felt that Emirates Airlines was a sincere or genuine sponsor, 9 out of the 10 (9/10) participants agreed. Participant L4 was the only one who disagreed with the sincerity of Emirates Airline’s sponsorship motives.

"I do think they have the clubs best interests at heart because it benefits themselves." – Participant L4

Even though L4 didn’t agree with Emirates Airline’s motives, L4 could at least agree that they did have the club’s intentions at the foremost of their heart, albeit for somewhat ulterior motives.
While the authors were trying to understand the perceptions of the different level of identified Arsenal FC fans towards other Premier League sponsorship agreements, something interesting was noted. Many different reasons were given as to whether the various sponsorship agreements were logical or not. The responses included the sponsors' values, the current performance of the team, the sponsor's area of business, and relationship towards sport in general, size and geographical location. The final two sponsorship deals included a beer company and a betting company. When asked about the fit involving the Maltese betting company, 9/10 participants agreed that it was a logical fit.

"Yes of course! Sport is about betting, so why not." – Participant L1

However, the only one to disagree was participant H2 who explained the negative effects that gambling inflicts on society. Furthermore, they alluded to the idea that since football has such a widespread and engaged fan base, they have the platform to influence the society.

"...if you want to get a better society you need to start when people are engaged, and football has a wide audience, it's fun, it's a world language!" – Participant H2

Nine participants viewed the fit in more simplistic terms, such as the connection with the sports industry or size and location of the sponsor. While only one participant alluded to ethical issues when determining whether the fit was logical or not.

The size and prominence of the sponsor was also highlighted when discussing the sponsor-team fit. When asked a few questions about how the participants perceived the relationship between Emirates Airlines and whether it was a logical fit or not, all of the participants agreed to an extent that having a prominent company does help. In the case of Arsenal FC, capital is important towards the club's growth in terms of providing quality equipment and training facilities, while allowing them to sign and retain players and provide competitive salaries. Therefore, the participants perceived more prominent sponsors as more capable of contributing the capital needed to ensure Arsenal FC remains as a successful and prosperous football club.
"The capital definitely helps because it improves their facilities, their ability to build a team, it buys coaches and the players. It also builds a better foundation for the club as well, so like your stadiums and stuff for the fans." – Participant H4

"I think it has to be internationally successful, that's one point. Another characteristic is that they have really high revenue in order to pay for new players and financially assist Arsenal." – Participant H3

"It's about the company that gives the best deal, and the best money." – Participant L2

"...the club needs financial supplies so they can become better as a club." – Participant L5

4.2.4 Sports fan identification

Throughout the interviewing process, the authors had been attentive and conscientious to the different types of language and emotive cues used by all participants. For example, word selection, inflections and tone can all be important when expressing attitude towards a particular team.

The use of language is very important and can often be used to gain a deeper understanding of a particular stance on an issue. The participant who scored the highest level of identification with Arsenal FC on the SSIS scale was participant H4. While responding to this question, the authors noticed that H4 referred to Arsenal FC as "we". None of the other participants referred to Arsenal on such a personal level, rather the terms "Arsenal" or "the team" were used.

"I would probably say both because we obviously get a ton of capital from it which help builds our stadium and puts us in a good financial position" – Participant H4

With regards to understanding different fans' identification on the sponsor relationship, the authors wanted to identify how the participants would react if Arsenal FC lost Emirates Airlines as a sponsor. A hypothetical scenario was therefore given to the participants in the case of Arsenal FC losing Emirates Airlines as a sponsor due to conflicting issues in the sponsorship agreement. Interestingly enough, all five of the low-identified fans perceived
this scenario as a bad thing only due to fact that Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC have been in this working relationship for such a long duration.

"...I would probably pity it because since I have perceived it as such a well working relationship that they have had for such a long time." – Participant L1

"I would see it as a bad thing. Since it has been working for a long time, and so quick that something just changes..." – Participant L2

In addition to the high-identified fans, all five perceived the loss to be negative only in terms of Arsenal FC losing a big global sponsor to help financially support their club, therefore they sought out for hopes of the new potential sponsor being a big global company such as Emirates Airlines. The size and success of a company were predominately seen as the vital instigator amongst these high-identified fans because they want to see all of the benefits reaped for their team in the long run.

"...of course it would be negative for Arsenal especially. Big sponsors withdraw big money and merchandise." – Participant H2

"It would feel weird, but yeah, I would still be agreeing with Arsenal in terms of what is more beneficial for the club for the future. I would definitely have the clubs interest at heart more than the sponsor so to speak." – Participant H4
5 Analysis

This chapter analyzes the results from the empirical findings in the context of the researched frame of reference.

5.1 Benefits of sponsorship

The results obtained in the present thesis are consistent with previous studies in terms of sponsorship, confirming the fact that some of the biggest motivating factors in sponsorship can be seen through the financial gain of the sponsored party and exposure for the sponsor. According to Mitchell (2008), brand awareness is an important factor for companies who wish to become involved in sponsoring a sports team. All 10 of the identified Arsenal FC fans interviewed were highly aware of Emirates Airlines due to their sponsorship with Arsenal FC. It was interesting to note that even the low-identified Arsenal FC fans were aware of Emirates Airlines and had formed a perception of the company due to this association. This awareness of the sponsor supports Bühler et al. (2007) findings in that sports sponsorship is an important marketing tool for corporate sponsors. The authors agreed that the benefits of sponsor awareness were not influenced by the identification of the Arsenal FC fans.

In chapter 4.2.1, table 3 presents the high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans' perceptions of the benefits of Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC's ongoing sponsorship agreement. Wann and Branscombe (1993) stated that their reliable and valid SSIS scale found that high-identified fans expressed stronger feelings towards their team as compared to low-identified fans. In relation to this thesis, all high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the benefits for their team as the financial gain while the benefits for Emirates Airlines was perceived in terms of awareness. To fully understand the role that identification played on perceived benefits, the authors delved further into the responses.

On a closer examination, it was noted that all high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the benefits of sponsorship positively as it led to financial support for the their club. While the low-identified Arsenal FC fans aligned their perceptions more towards the benefits Emirates Airlines received through awareness and exposure with their connection to
Arsenal FC. The authors agreed that the high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the benefits that favour their team as the most important factor. These observations support Wann and Branscombe's (1993) findings in that high-identified sports fans are generally more involved and interested in their respective team.

5.2 Sponsorship portfolio diversity

Bruhn and Holzer (2015) found that a large perceived sponsorship portfolio size positively affects the attitude of consumers toward the sponsor. They further note that companies that engage in an extensive number of sponsorship activities achieve this by diversifying their sponsorship portfolio across different sponsor categories (Bruhn & Holzer, 2015). Emirates Airlines has an extensive and diverse sponsorship portfolio that spans across numerous sporting teams and events. It was revealed during the interviews that the majority of the identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the diversity of Emirates Airline's sponsorship portfolio positively. The detailed results found in chapter 4.2.2 showed that 9/10 participants perceived this to be positive for Arsenal FC. Based off these results, the authors have concluded that fan identification didn't play any significant role on fans' overall perceptions of the sponsorship portfolio diversity.

The authors did however note contrasting perceptions in terms of how Arsenal FC benefits from Emirates Airline's largely diverse sponsorship portfolio. The high-identified Arsenal FC fans positively perceived that having a large and prominent sponsor such as Emirates Airlines, resulted in access to capital that could be invested into acquiring new players, providing new equipment, maintaining facilities, etc. While the low-identified Arsenal FC fans also perceived the sponsorship portfolio diversity positively, they were less focused on the specific role that Emirates Airlines played for Arsenal FC. Although both high-identified and low-identified fans perceived the sponsorship portfolio diversity positively, high-identified fans were more receptive to the details of the positives associated with it.

In terms of duration, Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC have experienced a long and successful sponsorship agreement, one that has spanned over 12 years. This success was reflected in chapter 2.3 through Arsenal FC's Senior Vice President stating that "Emirates is the perfect partner for Arsenal" (Arsenal, 2012), while Emirates Airline's consistent amount of support to Arsenal FC has led to the extension of their current contract (Emirates, 2015).
All participants agreed that the long-term nature of the sponsorship between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC led to a more positive perception of Emirates Airlines. All of the participants further elaborated that a longer duration of a sponsorship agreement was perceived to show a higher quality of dedication and trustworthiness to their team.

"It conveys trust in a product, but not just consciously but also unconsciously. They sponsor Arsenal so you feel more comfortable flying with Emirates rather than another airline." – Participant L1

"...you want to know that the sponsors will be around for a while, it's not just all about the money." – Participant H2

Both high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans noted that the long sponsorship duration generated a positive perception of the sponsor, Emirates Airlines. Therefore, the authors have agreed that the level of fan identification didn't play any significant role in the fans' perceptions of the duration and the sponsorship.

5.3 Perception of sponsor-team fit

The authors attempted to gain an understanding of the participants’ general perception of a logical fit between a sponsor and a team. Through listing a number of different sponsorship deals within the Premier League, the authors wanted to see how the perceptions differed when taking other sponsorship deals into consideration.

In previous sponsorship literature conducted on the perception of sponsorship fit, Olson (2010) found that sponsor sincerity and sponsor attitude was a result of the consumer's perceived fit. The current thesis attempted to investigate whether Olson's (2010) findings differed when different levels of fan identification were taken into consideration. Through the use of two consecutive questions pertaining to their perceptions of sponsorship fit, the authors were able to deduce that if fans perceive Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC as a good fit, then they will infer sponsor sincerity. Therefore, the authors found that the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans played no significant role, rather the participants who perceived a good fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC inferred sponsor sincerity. Thus, the thesis agreed with Olson's (2010) findings in that sponsor
sincerity was a result of the consumer's perceived fit, or in this case, the identified fan's perceived fit.

One of the most important aspects of the interviews pertained to trying to understand how both high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC. In trying to establish the perception of the sponsor-team fit, the authors attempted to gain an insight into whether or not they perceived the sponsor-team fit to be of a logical nature. As seen in table 5, all 10 participants agreed that the sponsor-team fit was logical, however the reasoning behind this logical fit didn't correspond with the fans' level of identification. Some of the justifications included financial support, duration, sponsor portfolio size and the quality nature of the club and sponsor. While the authors gained a general answer on whether it was perceived as a logical fit or not, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans.

Furthermore, as discussed in the frame of reference, Olson and Thjømoe (2011) found that the duration of the sponsorship can greatly predict overall fit. Notably, relationships that were deemed to be 'long-term' and 'continuing' contributed to the clarity of the overall fit. As Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC have endured a protracted sponsorship, the authors attempted to understand how this duration influenced the perceptions of the sponsor-team fit by high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans. It was found that all 10 participants agreed that the duration of the sponsorship contributed to their positive perception of the sponsor-team fit. Therefore, the results agreed with Olson and Thjømoe (2011) that duration can predict the overall fit.

"I think that it's more serious when you do a long-term deal than a short-term one. It shows a lot that they are serious that they want to provide something for the club and I think it's great." – Participant H5

"If they have a long contract it means that the relationship between the club and the company is going well and it's like trustworthy." – Participant L2

Another factor influencing the participants' perceptions of the sponsor-team was seen in terms of money. When asked to identify the role sponsorship plays in sport, even though some participants cited values as an important factor, every participant ultimately admitted
that a sponsorship deal is now essentially a business transaction. Thus, all high-identified and low-identified fans alike, perceived that money was an important factor when determining the sponsor-team fit. This observation therefore supported McDonald's (1991) evidence that the perceived match ultimately influences the consumer's attitude towards the sponsorship engagement. The thesis found that money, a factor of the perceived match, positively influences the fans' attitude towards the sponsorship. However, since all of the identified Arsenal FC fans agreed to this fact, the authors concluded that fan identification didn't play a major role in the perception of sponsor-team fit, in terms of money.

Table 4 illustrated the participants' general perceptions towards six different sponsor-team fits. The authors agreed that fan identification didn't play any obvious role in terms of general perceptions of sponsor-team fit. The perceptions of all participants were formed on numerous rationales including the sponsor's values, the team's performance, the sponsor's area of business, and the relationship towards the sport in general, size and geographical location. However, anytime the participant was unaware or unsure of the sponsor, they would ultimately infer a bad sponsor-team fit. Therefore, the authors acknowledged that in order to perceive a logical sponsor-team fit, the sponsor must be well-known amongst the sports fan, be it high-identified or low-identified.

Lastly, the authors observed that the general perceptions of sponsor-team fit were rarely formed on ethical beliefs. Only one participant inferred that alcohol and gambling companies implied a bad sponsor-team fit, citing the unethical and addictive nature of the company’s product. The concurred that the perceptions of general sponsor-team fits were universally superficial observations and the participants rarely looked at the complex levels such as ethical or social issues.

5.4 Sports fan identification

As explained in the frame of reference, sports fan identification has received attention within sponsorship literature, however it's often assumed that the underlying factors of identification are similar across all fans (Norris et al., 2015). This thesis attempted to focus on the different levels of identified Arsenal FC fans in order to understand fan identification factors pertaining to a specific team, and more specifically how high-
identified fans and low-identified fans perceived the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC.

In previous research, Wann and Branscombe (1993) noted that differences were observed in persons who possessed different levels of identification with a particular sporting team. When asked to comment on their feelings towards losing Emirates Airlines as a sponsor, all participants perceived it as unfavourable, however there was a clear distinction with the answers of high-identified and low-identified fans. All of low-identified fans perceived it to be unfavourable due to the duration of the sponsorship thus far, while all high-identified fans perceived it as unfavourable due to loss of financial support for Arsenal FC. This thesis found that high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the loss of Emirates Airlines unfavourable as it affects their team, who they are highly identifiable and involved with. These observations support Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) findings as high-identified Arsenal FC fans related the loss of sponsor specifically to the team and how it would affect their performance in the future.

While all participants support Arsenal FC, the level of identification did result in differences to the extent of their support. All five of the high-identified fans acknowledged the benefits Arsenal FC derive through their sponsorship with Emirates Airlines. As opposed to the low-identified fans, where their answers would alternate in supporting Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC. Furthermore, high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the benefits of sponsorship in the context of their benefits for helping their club, while the low-identified fans felt less strongly about defining the benefits Arsenal FC receive from this sponsorship; rather defining the benefits of sponsorship in more general terms. Therefore, the authors concluded that the high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceived the sponsors more positively as long as the club received the financial support in order to maintain the future success of the club.

Finally, according to Wann and Branscombe (1993), the level of dedication amongst high-identified fans is perceived to result in higher benefits for the sponsor in terms of patronage. However, the authors have gathered information that has contrasted towards this study. All of the high-identified fans may have perceived the fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC to be logical, but only because Emirates Airlines helps support the club with a large amount of capital. When these identified fans were asked how they would
feel if Arsenal FC were to change their sponsor, the high-identified fans did not show much emotion to this loss. Instead, they were only concerned about Arsenal FC concentrating on finding another sponsor that could continue to contribute significant financial support and are willing to engage in another long-term contract.
6 Conclusion

This chapter presents a thorough analysis of the findings as well as the answers to the defined research questions. In addition, the authors propose theoretical and practical contributions, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

The main purpose of this research was to analyse how different levels (high and low) of identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden perceived the sponsor-team fit with Emirates Airlines. To fulfil the purpose of the research, three research questions (RQ, RQa and RQb) were posed. In order to answer those research questions, 10 interviews were conducted.

The main research question (RQ) was: How do different levels of Arsenal FC fans perceive the sponsor-team fit between Arsenal FC and their main sponsor Emirates Airlines? The results indicated a divergence between five high-identified and five low-identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden. All of the identified fans revealed similarities in the perception of sponsor-team fit. However, some differences between the high-identified and low-identified fans could be seen through the financial support for the team and creating more exposure for the sponsor. Therefore, the sub-research questions helped explore these differences in more detail.

The first sub-research question (RQa) was: How do high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive this sponsor-team fit? The results indicated that high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines to be logical. This was due to Emirates Airlines being perceived as a large and well-known company that provides a lot of financial support to Arsenal FC, allowing them to purchase new players and maintain the success of the club. The majority of high-identified fans perceived Arsenal FC to be the major beneficiary of the sponsorship deal. Thus, the authors noted that high-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive the sponsor-team fit positively given that the company provides a favourable amount of financial support, and has been associated with the club for a long duration.

The second sub-research question (RQb) was: How do low-identified Arsenal FC fans perceive this sponsor-team fit? The results indicated that low-identified Arsenal FC fans also perceive
the sponsor-team fit to be logical. However, the logical fit was mainly due to the duration of the sponsorship thus far. The majority of the low-identified Arsenal FC fans saw both Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC as beneficiaries of the sponsorship deal. While the low-identified Arsenal FC fans did perceive the sponsor-team fit to be logical, their reasons and justifications were clarified in more general terms.

The authors have concluded that the sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC was perceived positively, irrespective of their level of identification. However, it was noted that high-identified fans perceived the sponsor-team fit in terms of benefits pertaining to Arsenal FC, while low-identified fans perceived the sponsor-team fit in more general terms. Even though the perception of the sponsor-team fit was based upon different reasons, all of the identified fans articulated that financial support was the biggest contributing factor to the sponsor-team fit. Thus, the authors have further concluded that although fan identification had no significant impact on the overall perception of sponsor-team fit, fan identification did play a role in the reasons and degree to which they perceived the sponsor-team fit.

6.1 Implications

The authors have divided the implications into two sections: theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical implications present the theoretical findings that can contribute to possible future research within the sports sponsorship field. The practical implications focus more specifically on the implications of those in managerial roles related to sponsorship.

6.1.1 Theoretical implications

To the best of the authors' knowledge, there had been limited research conducted specifically on the perceived sponsorship fit between a sponsor and a sports team. This thesis has resulted in a clearer understanding of the sponsor-team fit, creating a relevant contribution to the existing sports sponsorship literature. More specifically, this research looked specifically at whether or not different levels of fan identification played a role on the perception of the sponsor-team fit.
Sports sponsorship literature had predominately focused on the perceived sponsorship fit in terms of the fit between a sponsor and an event. To the best of the authors' knowledge, very little research had been conducted on how different levels of fan identification impacts the perceived fit of the sponsor-team fit in a real-world situation, with the majority limited to the use of hypothetical or abstract sponsors. The current research had provided literature, of a practical perspective; to further understand how different levels of fan identification impacts the perception of the fit between a sponsor and a team.

As noted in the frame of reference, previous sponsorship literature had conducted very little research on the effects of duration and its effect on fit perceptions. However, amongst this limited area of previous research, Olson and Thjømøe (2011) found that duration of the sponsor does indeed lead to positive effects on perceived fit. Thus, this research confirmed the notion that duration does have a positive effect on the fans' perception of the sponsor-team fit, however the level of fan identification didn't play any significant role.

Finally, the current study had taken Wann and Branscombe's (1993) sports sponsorship identification scale and adapted it to create a multi-dimensional identification scale. Through adding the second dimension, the authors were able to measure not only the fans' identification with the team, but also the fans' identification with the sponsor-team fit. The creation of this multi-dimensional scale helped to provide a deeper understanding of a fan's identification.

### 6.1.2 Practical implications

From a practical point of view, the results of this thesis managed to create strategies that could be implemented by both managers of sports teams or a company who are involved within sponsorship activities.

The findings of this thesis can guide managers of companies who are involved in sponsoring a sports team. Firstly, the research found that all participants agreed that the duration of the sponsorship deal led to a favourable perception of the sponsor. Thus, a company who commits to a team for a long period of time can be perceived more favourably as it provides a stronger sense of trust and loyalty by all fans. Furthermore,
sponsorship can positively influence brand awareness, especially when a sponsor sponsors multiple categories (e.g. stadium and team). Lastly, it was noted that although financial support was the most important factor, both high-identified and low-identified fans agreed that the values of a company are important to sponsor-team fit. Therefore, a company may see an added benefit in aligning their core values with a sports team.

The findings of this thesis can also serve as a guide to sports teams’ management department responsible for the sponsorship activities. As found in this research, all of the identified fans highlighted that the biggest contributing factor to their perception of sponsor-team fit was seen in terms of financial support. In particular, the perceptions of the high-identified fans' were formed based on the sponsor's ability to deliver substantial financial support that benefited the team. All of the identified fans perceived that companies with a large sponsorship portfolio were most qualified to sponsor as they had already proven their value as a sponsor. The authors suggest that by finding a sponsor with an established sponsorship portfolio, which can contribute financially, will positively influence the perception of the sponsor-team fit across all fans.

6.2 Limitations

Although this thesis added new insight and perspectives to the study of sports sponsorship, the authors acknowledged that there were limitations. This thesis focused on a very specified topic, namely the perception of high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans in Sweden. Therefore, the generalization of the findings can be elaborated towards a wider audience or perhaps in England where the base of Arsenal FC is located and football is adored. Furthermore, since the target population of this thesis were fans of Arsenal FC and past studies have focused more on hypothetical teams and events, the generalization of the results were limited towards a football team favoured the most in Sweden.

6.3 Future research recommendations

While acknowledging the limitations, this thesis has presented a number of recommendations for future research. This thesis can be replicated towards another sport, for example hockey or rugby, to observe whether or not different levels of identification within a sport, other than football, impact the perceptions of the sponsor-team fit. Since
previous research has focused on the behavioural attitudes of identified fans with respect
to hypothetical scenarios, it would be interesting to gain a deeper understanding of similar,
real-world scenarios.

This thesis created an identification matrix with four separate quadrants, of which the
authors chose quadrant 1 (low team identification, low identification with the sponsor-team
fit) and 3 (high team identification, high identification with the sponsor-team fit). These
were chosen to gain an understanding of fans with an opposite level of identification
with the team, namely high-identified and low-identified fans. An interesting study would
be to focus on the remaining two quadrants and gain an understanding of the attitudes of
these fans. From the perspective of the sponsor, it may prove beneficial to see if it's
possible to shift these identified fans' identification with the sponsor from low to high.

As specified throughout this thesis, high-identified and low-identified Arsenal FC fans were
the main focus in relation to the study at hand, excluding fans of moderate identification.
Future research can perhaps focus on the moderate level of identified fans and find out
whether or not it's possible to increase their identification towards a high level of
identification. As previously mentioned, high-identified fans can produce a number of
benefits for the sponsor, hence it could prove to be a valuable future research stream.

In terms of purchase intentions, it would be interesting to gain an understanding into how
different levels of fan identification impact the fans' intentions to purchase goods or
services from the sponsor. In the case of Emirates Airlines, the service they offer is
perceived to be one of premium quality and the price reflects that. It would be interesting
to investigate another team sponsored by a company that offers 'everyday' goods or
services, such as a supermarket or a beverage company. When the price of the goods and
services provided by the sponsor are less expensive, how do the different levels of fan
identification affect the intention to purchase?

Finally, this thesis used a qualitative approach in an attempt to gain an insight into the
perceptions of the sponsor-team fit by different levels of identified fans. Future research
could follow up this research with a quantitative approach in an attempt to quantify the
results.
References


Appendices

Appendix A – In-depth interview questionnaire

Sports sponsorship

1. What does sports sponsorship mean to you?
2. What sort of benefits do sports sponsorship deals deliver?
3. Off the top of your head, can you think of any major sports sponsorship deals?
   a. More specifically in the Premier League?
4. Do you think these sponsorship deals are important to individual clubs in the league? Why/Why not?

Perception of Emirates Airlines as a product

5. Have you ever flown with Emirates Airlines before?
   a. If yes, how did you perceive the quality of service?
   b. If not, would you consider using their services in the near future?
6. What is your overall perception of Emirates Airlines?

Perception of Emirates Airlines as a sponsor

7. How do you perceive Emirates Airlines as a sponsor of Arsenal FC?
   a. Positive or negative, please explain why.
8. Manchester United has Chevrolet as their shirt sponsor but not as their stadium sponsor. Would you perceive Emirates Airlines differently if they were only the shirt sponsors?
9. Manchester City has Etihad Airways as both their shirt sponsor and their stadium sponsor. Do you perceive Emirates Airline’s sponsorship more positively due to their commitment across a number of different sponsorship categories?

Emirates Airline's sponsorship diversity

10. Are you aware of any other sporting teams or events that Emirates Airlines sponsor?
    a. If so, can you name some of them?
11. What do you think about the diversity of Emirates Airline’s sponsorship portfolio?

Sponsorship duration

12. In your opinion, does the duration of a sponsor impact your perception towards a particular team?
13. Do you know how many years Emirates Airlines has been the main sponsor of Arsenal FC?
14. How does this duration of this sponsorship impact your perception towards Emirates Airlines?
    a. Does this duration increase
15. If Emirates Airlines were a new sponsor (e.g. 2 years old), how different would your perception be?

**Hypothetical Scenario #1:** Arsenal FC and Emirates Airlines decided to terminate their contract at the end of the season due to conflicting expectations of the sponsorship agreement. Arsenal FC is then approached by another multinational corporation who is looking to expand their investment portfolio. They see sponsorship as a good opportunity to increase their exposure.

16. How would you feel about the loss of Emirates Airlines, a long-term sponsor?
   a. Could you describe this using a few words?

17. Emirates Airlines has a large sponsorship portfolio, while this new sponsor currently has none. Would you perceive this sponsor as more genuine?

**Prominence of the sponsor**

18. What is more important to you in terms of sponsorship – a sponsor who is prominent or a sponsor who perceives to be a good fit to the culture and values of the team? Please elaborate.
   a. Does the prominence of a sponsor have an impact on your perception of a team? (e.g. what if Arsenal FC was sponsored by a Naked Juice Bar or a Condecco café?)
      i. Is your perception towards a team altered due to the prominence or size of their sponsor?

19. Please comment on the following statement: "All the major teams in the Premier League have major sponsors, all the small teams have relatively small sponsors".

**Sponsor-team fit between Emirates Airlines and Arsenal FC**

20. In terms of sponsorship, how would you define a logical fit?

21. Do you believe that a logical fit is important between a team and sponsor (E.g. country of origin, type of company, size of company, relevance of company, etc.)?

22. I will list a number of different sponsorship agreements within the Premier League, could you please comment on whether they are a logical fit or not:
   a. Manchester United FC & Chevrolet (US)
   b. Chelsea FC & Yokohama (Japan)
   c. Manchester City FC & Etihad Airways (UAE)
   d. Tottenham FC & AIA (Chinese)
   e. West Ham United FC & Betway (Malta)
   f. Everton FC & Chang Beer (Thailand)


24. Do you feel that Emirates Airlines is a genuine/sincere sponsor (E.g. do they have the club's best interests at heart)?

**Hypothetical Scenario #2:** Arsenal FC allowed its members to become involved in the process of finding their new main sponsor. A list was produced with a number of different companies who range in sizes and industries.

25. What characteristics would you prefer when trying to find Arsenal FC's next main sponsor?
Financial Support & Fan’s Understanding

Which phrase best describes your stance of financial support through sports sponsorship? And please explain why.

- "I don't care about the sponsor."
- "Sponsorship is part of sports now, it doesn't matter what I think."
- "Sport is a business. Both the sponsor and the team are actively engaging in a business transaction."
- "I want the sponsor to reflect the values of my team."

26. "It is common for successful teams to have sponsors who provide significant financial support to them." Can you please elaborate on this statement?

27. Emirates Airlines provides funding towards Arsenal FC: what benefits can you see from this relationship?
   a. In terms of Arsenal FC.
   b. In terms of Emirates Airlines.

28. In your opinion, whom do you think benefits most from this relationship – Arsenal FC or Emirates Airlines?
Appendix B – Identification excel spreadsheet

Due to size of the document, the authors were unable to include the spreadsheet into the Thesis. If needed, this extra file can be asked upon request.